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JFK and the Reasons  
behind the Vietnam War:  
the Domino Theory

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## RESUMEN

La Guerra de Vietnam en plena Guerra Fría supuso uno de los mayores retos para la hegemonía estadounidense. John F. Kennedy, un joven y carismático presidente, fue el que tomó la decisión de aumentar la intervención militar estadounidense en Vietnam. Los motivos que llevaron a Kennedy a tomar esa decisión, a intervenir en mayor medida y a aferrarse a Vietnam con fuerza fueron un conjunto de circunstancias: los consejos y advertencias sobre la teoría del dominó del presidente anterior, Eisenhower, la influencia que ejercían los hombres de su propia administración, los informes y memorándums redactados y la presión internacional de demostrar el poderío de la nación tras varios fracasos en Berlín y en Cuba frente a la aparentemente imparable amenaza comunista. Lamentablemente, esa persistencia y determinación por no dejar caer Vietnam le hicieron ignorante de la verdadera revolución nacionalista por la que se iniciaron las protestas. En un principio alejada de las ideas comunistas, la revolución nacionalista fue tomando la forma de una revolución contra el colonialismo y la hegemonía occidental. Podría decirse que Estados Unidos en su afán por ganar a toda costa fue el causante de un Vietnam comunista que quiere contra occidente con todo lo que ello implica.

En esta tesis de fin de grado se tratarán los motivos por los que el presidente Kennedy decidió aumentar la participación estadounidense en Vietnam, si realmente estaba empujado por la amenaza de la teoría del dominó o simplemente buscaba subsanar sus errores y proteger el orgullo estadounidense. Abordará asimismo cuáles fueron las implicaciones de esta decisión.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** *Estados Unidos, guerra de Vietnam, John F. Kennedy, teoría del dominó, influencia de Eisenhower, justificación de la guerra, administración Kennedy, McNamara, planes de contrainsurgencia, Guerra Fría, imagen de Kennedy, sudeste asiático, Strategic Hamlet Program, comunismo, guerra*

## SUMMARY

The Vietnam War during the Cold War was one of the biggest challenges to the American hegemony. John F. Kennedy, a young and charismatic president, was the one who took the decision of increasing the American military intervention in Vietnam. Following Eisenhower's –his predecessor– advices and warnings about the domino theory, and influenced by the men of his own administration and the many memorandums and reports they wrote, all together with the international pressure to demonstrate their power after the unsuccessful Berlin and Cuba to stop the apparently unstoppable communist threat, President Kennedy decided to intervene and cling onto Vietnam. Unfortunately, this persistence and determination for avoiding the falling of Vietnam to communism made Kennedy oblivious to the true reason why the protests in Vietnam began, the nationalist revolution. At first far from the communist ideas, the nationalist revolution gradually transformed into a revolution against colonialism and Western hegemony. The United States, in their relentless will to win at all costs, were the ones who caused the creation of a communist Vietnam willing to fight the West and all its implications.

This thesis will address the reasons why the President Kennedy decided to increase American intervention in Vietnam, whether it was due to fears of domino theory or was looking after American pride and make up for his mistakes. The thesis will likewise discuss the implications of this decision.

**KEYWORDS:** *United States, Vietnam War, John F. Kennedy, domino theory, Eisenhower influence, justification of war, Kennedy administration, McNamara, counterinsurgency plans, Cold War, Kennedy public image, Southeast Asia, Strategic Hamlet Program, communism, war*



*“We cannot desist in Vietnam...”*

– JFK, 1962



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## **1) INTRODUCTION**

The Vietnam War was one of the biggest disasters in US foreign policy history, and it left the nation pride in a very weak position. This thesis will work on the reasons behind the entrance of the United States of America in the Vietnam War. The president that initiated it, John F. Kennedy, upheld that had there not been any American implication in the matter, all the other Southeast Asian powers would have succumbed to communism under the growing influence of the USSR in the area. This is what is known as the “domino theory”. Nevertheless, JFK also received criticism for this decision, as it is believed he only did it out of the willingness to show pride and power and out of frustration after conflicts in Cuba and Berlin. Did he truly believe in the domino theory or it was a mere demonstration of power?

## **2) PURPOSE AND MOTIVATION**

The motivation behind choosing this topic is that, throughout our degree of International Relations, the United States has always been perceived as one of the greatest – if not the greatest – power in the world. American people have been described as strong, courageous, and determined to fight for what they believe. It was thanks to the American people during the First and the Second World Wars that we, Europeans, are able to enjoy peace and democracy in our countries. If it had not been for the American people and their economic, political, and military assistance, Europe would not be as capable and strong as it is now. Europe – and almost all the rest of the world – has power because the United States has granted its power.

When someone is asked about the United States, they are always perceived as the best country in the world, or at least better than the majority of countries. They have established themselves as the leaders and guides of what is wrong and what is right, they believe they are responsible for the “peace” in the world.

Nevertheless, Americans too have had their own internal and external problems. The Vietnam War was one of the first hindrance they encountered in History. It was the first time someone confronted them so well they were unable to continue with their “mission”. But why did they enter in the first place?

### 3) STATE OF AFFAIRS

#### 3.1 COLD WAR

When the Allies defeated the fascist powers of Central Europe and gave an end to the Second World War in 1945, the world became divided into two big blocks. On one side, those countries that had been liberated by the United States and were therefore encouraged to adopt capitalism as the economic system of the State, mainly the Western part of Europe. On the other side, the countries that had been liberated by the Soviet Union, which were invited to adopt communism as the economic system of the State, mainly Eastern Europe.

Having been allies for several years with a common goal of defeating the Nazi despotism, now the United States and the Soviet Union saw themselves confronted by their economic, social, and political principles.

Although there is still an open debate, Pereira (2003) defends that the start of the worldwide conflict known as “Cold War” can be dated back to March 12, 1947, when the United States’ President, Mr. Harry S. Truman, addressed before the US Congress the following words:

“We shall not realize our objectives, however, unless we are willing to help free peoples to maintain their free institutions and their national integrity against aggressive movements that seek to impose upon them totalitarian regimes. [...] The peoples of a number of countries of the world have recently had totalitarian regimes forced upon them against their will” (Truman, 1947).

This was the speech when he first talked about the Truman Doctrine. It was also the moment in which there was an official declaration of intent. Back in Europe, the British Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, had already addressed his famous speech of the *Iron curtain* having divided the old continent. Communism was beginning to be perceived as a threat in the political arena and the Truman Doctrine was one of the measures to contain the Soviet expansion in Europe (Pereira, 2003).

When signing the peace treaties after the Second World War, the United States put pressure on the Western States to get rid of communists in the coalition governments. The Marshall Plan came together with the Truman Doctrine. The Marshall Plan was another tool used by the United States to refrain the communism from expanding in Europe. It consisted of a series of economic assistance plans for those governments which complied

with the capitalist and anti-communist American ideology. The Marshall Plan was crucial for the development and the economic recovery of the European States which had been devastated as a result of the Second World War.

If the Truman Doctrine was the political tool and the Marshall Plan the economic tool, the NATO was the military branch used by the United States. The Soviets, on the other hand, also developed some tools as counterparts, for example the Kominform and the Warsaw Pact.

All in all, the Cold War could be defined as a confrontation between two superpowers, two blocks of States and two global systems that will last until 1991, when one of the powers (the USSR) and one of the blocks (the socialist) failed to achieve their objectives and disappeared both in political and territorial terms. The Cold War entailed a permanent state of tension and implied a non-military direct confrontation which led to a bipolar world. This was due to the two blocs' will to increase their power. In order to protect themselves from the other, they developed influence spheres around them where they attempted to impose their ideology and principles. Gradually, these spheres of influence started to grow until almost the whole world was in one of the sides. There were times of contention of the enemy, acts of deterrence, and persuasion when there was a threat and, overall, espionage as a necessity to overtake the enemy (Pereira, 2003).

The main scenarios of confrontation between the two superpowers took place in proxy wars. According to Byman (2018): "A proxy war occurs when a major power instigates or plays a major role in supporting and directing the fighting in another country but does only a small portion of the actual fighting itself." (p.12). During the Cold War, proxy wars were the way the two blocs had to establish their power over the other one without having to carry out an actual direct war against each other. "Proxies also offer a way of fighting that can limit escalation." (ibid, p.13) Proxy wars, in contrast to traditional wars, involve a series of small alliances between big and small powers that work together for a common goal. The amount of military support given does not determine whether it is or not a proxy war, especially because in proxy wars the level of involvement is generally low.

The United States is known for using proxy wars as a common tool to intervene, especially during the Cold War. Apart from the objective of becoming stronger than their Soviet opponent, proxy wars are usually more beneficial than direct confrontation and

traditional regarding costs. For example, the use of resident soldiers rather than American or cultural and military knowledge of the land and situation (ibid).

Among some of the most known examples of proxy wars during the Cold War are the Korean War, the Vietnam War, Suez Crisis, or the Afghan Civil War.

### *3.1.1 Korea War*

Despite the opposition of the United Nations, on August 8, 1945 the Korean peninsula was divided by parallel 38 into two different countries as a consequence of Japan's surrender in the Second World War and the growing differences among the two big powers, the Soviet Union and the United States.

The northern part was left under the influence of the Soviet Union and was led by a communist pro-Soviet government under Kim Il Sung. The southern part was under American influence and established a pro-Western government led by Syngman Rhee. Both the Soviet and the American military stayed in the territories until 1948 and 1949 respectively in order to secure the areas (Pereira, 2003).

Nevertheless, at the beginning of 1950 a series of incidents took place in the frontier that led to the invasion of South Korea by the North Korean Army. The United States reacted almost immediately under the menace of a communist success in the area. President Truman introduced a series of military interventions under the direction of General MacArthur. Truman also took advantage of the absence of the USSR in the Security Council of the UN and passed several resolutions by which the intervention of the North Korean Army was labeled as a military attack. Consequently, most of the countries of the UN had to support South Korea (ibid).

Regarding North Korea, there were also many interventions from the socialist bloc. For example, apart from the Soviets, the Chinese government massively contributed to the North Korean regime, not just militarily, but also in economic and technological ways, to the point that if it wasn't for them, North Korea would have probably broken down. The fight against the United States and for Korean peninsula was so important for the Chinese, that even Mao Zedong, the former president, lost his son, Mao Anying, in this war (Roblin, 2017).

After some interventions from both sides, the confrontation became stagnant around the parallel 38 and the peace talks started. July 27, 1953, the Korean Armistice Agreement took place under the watchful stewardship of the UN (Pereira, 2003).

The Korean War was the first time the tensions of the Cold War came to light as an indirect military confrontation between the two superpowers. The UN was used by the United States as a means to exploit, manipulate, and justify the military interventions they were interested in. For the United States, this war was another reason to feel like guardians of freedom and democracy. For the communist bloc, the Korean War was a complete success because they increased their political and military presence in the area.

### 3.2 JFK

JFK's interest in politics began when he was still very young. He was the fourth generation of an Irish family that arrived in the United States fleeing from hunger and poverty. His grandfathers, from both sides, had been involved with politics. It is believed that the reasons behind his politician career include to break with the social barriers that were an obstacle for some citizens because of the Irish origins in the United States of the time, as well as to show that he could do better than his relatives and truly improve the economic and social situation of his family's condition.

During his academic years, he proved to have an innate talent for leadership, power, management, and initiative. After the First World War, he decided he wanted to improve the lives of his fellow countrymen. He started at the local elections in Boston, reaching the House of Representatives, and then he continued to the Senate. Finally, Mr. John Fitzgerald Kennedy was elected the 35<sup>th</sup> President of the United States on January 20, 1961, being only 43 years old. He was attractive, elegant, and had the necessary skills to stand out. Thanks to years of hard work, he was able to reach the top in his political career. He had a clear goal that he repeated since the very beginning: to revive the United States (Rus, 2017).

In his opening speech, he established this idea. Looking up to Woodrow Wilson and Franklin Roosevelt, he thoroughly defended the concept of a "New Frontier" that he defined as "the frontier of the 1960s, a frontier of unknown opportunities and perils, a frontier of unfulfilled hopes and threats" (JFK, 1960).

It was also in this speech where he highlighted the supremacy of the United States and the need for this country to succeed and protect freedom and democracy: "[...] is the choice our nation must take. [...] [A choice] between determined dedication and creeping

mediocrity. [...] All mankind waits upon our decision. A whole world looks to see what we will do. We cannot fail their trust, we cannot fail to try” (JFK, 1960).

Kennedy was President during the Cold War between the United States and the USSR, and he had to deal with a certain number of incidents with this regard, such as the Cuban missile crisis or the Vietnam War. Unluckily, JFK was only in office for 1032 days because he was brutally assassinated on November 22, 1963, when he was in Dallas, Texas, on his way to a campaign visit.

### 3.2.1 Bay of Pigs

In Cuba, no further than 150 km from the United States, Batista had ruled the island for over 25 years as a *caudillo* that served the public and private interests of the United States. Nevertheless, Fidel Castro’s insurgency against the regime was successful and defeated the Batista dictatorship in 1959, establishing a new Marxist-Leninist dictatorship.

The United States not only did not approve of this new regime but it also saw a potential threat to a communist leader so close to their land. Taking into account the more than 100,000 Cuban exiles that arrived in the US after Castro’s *golpe*, the United States’ CIA, under Eisenhower’s presidency, developed a plan to take down the dictator: Operation Pluto.

The new elections took place before this plan could be taken into action by Eisenhower. Nevertheless, it was also on Kennedy’s interest to get rid of Castro, so after major changes in the plan, he authorized it. More than 1,500 armed men landed on Bay of Pigs in April 1961. The attackers, however, were defeated within three days and captured under Castro’s orders (Dunne, 2011).

The main problem was the convergence of the American military point of view and the Cuban one, more habituated with guerrilla tactics. There is still debate today regarding whether that American intervention was necessary or not: “had the American government not been involved, such an invasion might have succeeded” (ibid, p. 453). A classic guerrilla warfare mixed with political tools to attract a higher number of Cubans on the island would have been more successful (ibid).

In the aftermath, President Kennedy accepted the responsibility of the failed operation but blamed his forerunner for creating and developing such an operation so poorly.

### *3.2.2 Berlin Wall*

After the Second World War, the leaders of the winning powers met in a conference in Yalta to find a solution for the defeated Germany. Winston Churchill, Franklin Roosevelt, and Joseph Stalin gathered in 1945 and established the different goals of the occupation policy in Germany. Among them, there is the denazification, demilitarization, and democratization. Nevertheless, there were disagreements between the Western countries and the USSR as to how to achieve these goals. So, they also decided to divide Germany into four occupation zones and Berlin into four sectors. Each of these areas will be “protected” by one of the countries, including France.

The division of Germany will, later on, lead to one of the first Cold War conflicts. Apart from the obvious political, economic, and social differences, the division of Germany openly creates a territorial division between the East and the West. “From Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic, an iron curtain has descended across the continent” (Churchill, 1946).

As a consequence, two German states emerged in 1949. The combination of the Western zones led to the creation of the Federal Republic of Germany, which was built under the Western principles: democratic constitutional state, separation of powers, free elections, a system of private companies... In the Eastern Zone, the German Democratic Republic was created under the socialist principles, with a one-party system (the Socialist Unity Party) and state-run economy (Pereira, 2008).

The Soviet Union was not thrilled by the high number of Germans that fled from East Germany to West Germany, especially in the spring of 1961, when East Germany’s economy is falling and the number of escapees increases.

During the night of August 13, 1961, the leader of the socialist party in East Germany, Walter Ulbricht, under the pressure of Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev, gave the order to raise a wire fence in Berlin dividing the Eastern and the Western sectors. This will be the origin of the Berlin Wall. The wire fence will be later on substituted by breeze blocks and concrete slabs before reaching the big concrete blocks, anti-tank obstacles, and the death strip. Heinz Hoffman, the Defence Minister in East Germany, declared in August 1966: “Anyone who does not respect the wall will feel the bullet” (in Hertle, 2011, p. 121).

The Berlin Wall increased the differences between the two superpowers of the Cold War and brought with it several years of “imprisonment” and a divided nation. Families were broken, East Germans who tried to escape were treated brutally and at least 138 people were killed between 1961 and 1989 (Hertle, 2011).

By 1989, USSR leader Mikhail Gorbachev had started giving the countries under the Warsaw Pact more independence, the “iron curtain” begins to be dismantled between Hungary and Austria, the protests on both sides of Germany increased. Finally, on November 9, 1989, the guards at the East side of the Wall open the gates and German reunification takes place.

### *3.2.3 Cuban missile crisis (1962)*

The Spirit of Camp David, when Nikita Khrushchev became the new Soviet leader and described the situation of peaceful coexistence, did not last long.

In January 1962, after several years of distancing from the Marxist-Leninist Cuban regime, the United States succeeded in expelling Cuba from the Organization of American States. As a result of years of being disregarded by the United States, Fidel Castro decided to become closer and closer to the Soviet bloc. Khrushchev took advantage of the situation and attended the cry of help the Cuban leader was making. This way, the Soviets could strengthen their position in Latin America, which was, until then, part of the United States’ sphere of influence. Between July and August 1962, the number of Soviet ships carrying Cuba food, machinery, and conventional weapons increased ostensibly. Consequently, the United States made use of one of their espionage planes to be aware of the situation (Pereira, 2003).

On October 22, President Kennedy announced that the United States had proof of Soviet military missiles in Cuba that supposed a direct menace to the country. Thus, he first declared a naval blockade of the island and also that the United States will respond to any direct threat from that moment on.

While it was regarded as a “quarantine” by the Americans which did not affect or block basic necessities, the Soviets considered it as an act of war, as expressed by Khrushchev in his letter to JFK on October 24, 1962:

The Soviet government considers the violation of the freedom of navigation in international waters and air space to constitute an act of aggression propelling humankind into the abyss of a world nuclear-missile war. [...] if the American side violates these rights, it must be aware

of the responsibility it will bear for this act. [...] We will then be forced on our part to take those measures we deem necessary and sufficient to defend our rights. To this end we have all that is necessary. (Library of Congress, 1962, para. 8).

The UN tried to mediate this confrontation, but the tension was extremely high during the following days. On the one side, JFK and the Americans demanded the complete removal of the missiles in Cuba; while on the other side, USSR and Cuba argued they were a defense tool. In the meantime, on both sides the weapons continued to be armed and they prepared for an invasion.

There were several opportunities in which the world was on the verge of a war, but diplomacy always continued. In the end, Robert Kennedy had a meeting with Anatoly Dobrynin, the USSR ambassador. After intense negotiation, they reached an agreement: the USA would withdraw the missiles from Turkey and Italy and promise to never invade Cuba while the USSR promised the Soviet withdrawal from Cuba under UN inspection. Dobrynin immediately dialed Moscow and repeated Robert Kennedy's words at the meeting "time is of the essence and we shouldn't miss the chance" (1962, para. 15). The next day, Khrushchev announced the removal of the Soviet missiles from Cuba, and later on JFK also talked about the withdrawal of the American missiles. Everything was finally put into action on October 28, 1962 (Jordan, 2016).

### 3.3 VIETNAM

Vietnam's history shows that they are a country prone to affiliate with a dominant civilization, consequently adapting that civilization's ideas, institutions, and technology to Vietnamese advantage. For example, prior to the Western colonization, the people living in today's Vietnam were under Chinese rule for many hundreds of years (Buttinger et al. 2019).

#### *3.3.1 French colony*

Until the mid-1550s, the main stage of action was territorial Europe, but it was slightly changing towards a more global scene. America's discovery freed the European continent from its geographical cage. Colonization opened the doors for all the European countries which were seeking for more power. Every colony and every commercial port were an interesting stimulus for the metropolitan economy.

The more the European countries expanded, the more they found and the more European countries that wanted to jump into the colonization race. From the 18<sup>th</sup> century to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, European colonization experienced a transformation: from America to Asia and Africa.

During the last years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with the development of the monopolist capital movement and the great economic expansion as a consequence of the second industrial revolution, the Western colonialism and imperialism reach their summit in their political control and economic expansion all over the rest of the world. This way, they accomplish the building of great empires and they start distributing the colonial territory (Pereira, 2003).

Some of the motives behind colonization have been explained by Pereira (2003): apart from the obvious economic driving forces, there was also a desire of expanding their military and political power and prestige in the international arena, to advocate their patriotism and nationalism, and to control the strategic spots. Likewise, the colonial powers considered themselves as scientifically, socially, and intellectually superior and therefore believed it was a moral obligation to help the colonized people.

The territory that makes what is today known as Vietnam was firstly ruled under the Chinese for over a thousand years. Thanks to their influence, the Vietnamese experienced some type of technological advance, but it also came with an imposition of a different culture and language. Nevertheless, the Vietnamese people resisted a complete assimilation of the Chinese habits and always struggled against their political rule. The Chinese dynasties ruled and exploited the Vietnamese lands until the decline of the Chinese empire when they finally achieved their independence. For almost one thousand years, the Vietnamese people achieved what they have always longed for and what they will always look back to – independence.

Unfortunately, the imperialism in Western Europe started a race for world domination. Vietnam's territory was invaded by the French in 1857 under the lead of Napoleon III. The reasons behind it were the missionary propaganda as well as the boom in the French economy. The economic surplus that resulted from it generated the need to expand for a larger share overseas, more specifically, in the territories in Asia (Buttinger et al, 2019).

Since the very beginning, the Vietnamese put up resistance in order to avoid the French invasion. As a result of this initial opposition, the whole Vietnam territory was not

completely dominated until 1867, when it was given the name of Cochinchina. Following the European imperialism, the French people established an administration that followed the Western system: economic exploitation of the land and resources and the domination of the people. The Vietnamese bureaucracy was left without any power or control as the French rule was enforced at all levels of the country's administration, even Vietnamese emperors, who were withdrawn and replaced by other people more inclined towards the French (ibid).

Due to the fact that the main goal of the French investments in the colony was not the systematic economic development of the territory but, instead, the return for the investors, a very small share of the profits was later on reinvested in the colony. The economic progress achieved by the French in Vietnam during the 20<sup>th</sup> century barely benefited the whole population. Instead, it was only advantageous for a few high-class Vietnamese and French.

The French used the Vietnamese and their resources to support the public work projects in the colony. Nevertheless, this had a dreadful impact on the Vietnamese people. For example, the enforced taxes on the crop reduced the Vietnamese farmers' share of the product. The peasants were recruited as forced labor for the projects, such as exploitation of mines and rubber plantations, the salaries were low and there was no medical care at all (ibid).

As a result of this domination and exploitation, the French were always perceived as their enemy, specially as the world depression during the 1930s intensified their exploitation of the Vietnamese. The Vietnamese went from Chinese domination to French domination, and all they ever wished for was independence. This, together with the fact that the French portrayed the Vietnamese people as inferior, led to the rise of nationalist movements.

### *3.3.2 Vietnamese nationalism and communism*

Almost since the first establishment of the French in Vietnam's territories, a strong sense of nationalism and anti-French movement emerged. The large areas dedicated to the plantation of products like rice and rubber that were created by the French had an alienating effect on the farmers, who were forced on to becoming plantation laborers. By the year 1930, half of all the land in Vietnam was held by only 3% of the landowners, while at the same time 3 out of 4 laborers families held no land at all. (Mason, 2005).

At first, this national movement positioned thoroughly towards the past, admiring the ideas of Vietnam before the French colonization. Consequently, the main goal of this nationalism was the reestablishment of the old imperial order (Buttinger et al, 2019).

Woodrow Wilson's ideas exposed after the First World War led to a young Ho Chi Minh to make a declaration of interest to the French. In this declaration, he demanded that the colonial people should be given rights of equal weight as those to the European rulers. This declaration was completely ignored and Ho Chi Minh tried to seek for results in other places (ibid).

The Soviet Revolution was a turning point for him. The Bolsheviks realized that their main objective was to export their revolutionary ideas onto the colonial territories. In the Second Congress of Komintern, the Bolsheviks announced that the colonial issue was a priority. Lenin himself expressed that the international communist movement will compromise in order to fight for any political or social power that demanded the national emancipation of the colonies. A war against the capitalist British and French.

Ho Chi Minh had traveled to Europe when he was young and he was living in France when the whole communist movement rose. When he went back to his country, he became the leader of the nationalist communist movement in Vietnam during the 1920s and 1930s known as the League of Independence or Vietminh. These movements successfully achieved the creation of soviet states in Northern Vietnam, but they were quickly repressed by the French. Ho Chi Minh was portrayed by the Vietnamese as someone with a true dedication to freeing his country and his people from foreign domination (ibid).

### 3.3.3 *WWII*

The Second World War meant a change for the colonies. In 1940, when France was surprised by the German blitzkrieg and became governed by the Vichy regime, Japan took the opportunity to occupy the Indochina region (Mason, 2005). At first, Japan came into the country justifying it would give the Vietnamese the liberation and independence they have been demanding. Nevertheless, they ended up occupying the country and acting as bad, if not worse, as the previous French colonizers.

Of course, the nationalist Vietnamese also saw this occupation as illegitimate and fought against whoever was in their way for their independence. In 1942, the United States acknowledged the Vietminh resistance movement against the Japanese, but were not

delighted with their leader's ideology. Around the same time, Roosevelt and Churchill designed the Atlantic Charter, which proclaimed "the right of all people to choose the form of government under which they will live" (NATO, 1941, para. 10). The hope for independence of the colonies did not last long, because only one month later, the British Prime Minister announced in the House of Commons that it would not apply to any of their colonies, followed by France and Holland.

Once the Japanese surrendered, the Vietminh were quick to take control over Hanoi, the capital of the country, and to claim the authority of the whole of Vietnam. When the French returned to the colony, they first offered certain independence within a French Union. Nevertheless, the negotiations ended up failing due to their rejection of the communist minority to be included in the government. Instead, a dominion government was established that lacked the support of the people. Consequently, the communist influence within the nationalist movement expanded so much that, by 1949, Vietnam was dominated by a communist majority (Mason, 2005) (see Annex 1).

#### *3.3.4 Geneva agreements*

The Vietnamese, however, did not surrender because they did not want to go back to following the orders of France. The war between them continued until the battle of Dien Bien Phu in 1954 when the French were defeated by the Vietnamese. This battle was a turning point in the events because it led to the start of intensive negotiations between the winning Allies of WWII with the aim of putting an end to the conflicts in Asia.

The Geneva Agreements, more specifically, the Agreement on the Cessation of Hostilities in Viet-Nam, counts with 47 articles which are divided into six different chapters. The main aspects they go through are the following: they proclaim a provisional military demarcation line along the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel and a demilitarized zone, dividing temporarily Vietnam in two different parts and give 300 days for each side to withdraw their troops to their side. The Geneva Agreements (1954) also established a series of principles and procedures governing the implementation of the agreement, expecting free elections within two years, and a ban on the introduction of foreign troops in Vietnam, together with military personnel, arms and munitions.

Despite exhaustive negotiations and the reach to an agreement, both the Vietnamese government and the United States refused to sign it, although the Americans did commit to abide by the agreement. This was due to the reluctance of American officials towards

a demilitarization. They believed if put into practice, it would mean a disaster because the Communist ideology around the whole country would give the communist party the victory in the democratic elections (HISTORY, 2019).

### *3.3.5 Vietnamese insurgency: the National Liberation Front and the Viet Cong*

At first, the main insurgents were the Viet Minh, an anti-French organization that fought for the liberation and independence of Vietnam. Nevertheless, with the rise of the American intervention, and the increasing communist groups, they all unified under the National Liberation Front in 1960. The National Liberation Front consisted of a political organization which has as main objective to end with the government in South Vietnam and reunify both North and South Vietnam. The political component was a communist party established in 1962, and the military arm of the organization was the known as Viet Cong, although there were before some military groups which opposed the South Vietnam's government (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2018).

The Viet Cong's military tactics were very far from the modernized American ones. They lacked aircrafts or any kind of artillery on their own. Nevertheless, as history would tell, military superiority does not always imply victory (see Annex 2). The Viet Cong's main military tactic was the well-known guerrilla warfare. These guerrillas involved the use of the knowledge of the territory to their advantage, in other words, they avoided open battles in flatland and carried out surprise attacks in the dense Vietnamese jungles, only to then hide again in the landscape. They used a large range of tunnel systems and traps which stretched over 300 km and underground hospitals, wells, and dwelling to hide the soldiers and supporters of the Viet Cong. The Viet Cong also focused on the countryside and left the areas in which there was a higher concentration of population to the government. They gained the support of the peasants by offering help and promising land and wealth under communist ideas (BBC, 2020).

## 3.4 LAOS

For the purposes of the thesis, its main focus will be on the Vietnam war and the American intervention guided by President Kennedy in this territory. Nevertheless, throughout the thesis, there will be some references to the Laos insurgency. This is because the majority of Southeast Asian countries share some history and culture and are in one way or another

interrelated to each other. Therefore, the aim of this section is to briefly explain the situation in Laos at the time.

Historically, Laos was, like Vietnam, a colony of the French and was treated very similarly. Before the French colonization, Laos was considered to be a group of tribes which were connected under a “nation” by the French. Therefore, the French were the ones who started giving a feeling of national identity (Mason, 2005). The Geneva agreements also gave them independence, but a spark of communism was emerging by that time. The Pathet Lao, a communist nationalistic group, was created by one of Ho Chi Minh’s supporters. Laos was “considerably influenced in its policies and actions by the Communist Vietnam” (ibid, p. 288).

Laos was the initial threat according to Eisenhower. This was due to the fact that Pathet Lao controlled much of the territory, and the country was also very geographically close to North Vietnam. However, Kennedy focused on Vietnam because of the Ho Chi Minh Trail, a secondary route which connected with South Vietnam used by to supply the Viet Cong in his area (Llewellyn, Southey & Thompson, 2019). A stronger communist movement in Vietnam and the leadership of Ho Chi Minh probably led Kennedy to focus on Vietnam over Laos, or that was what was publicly portrayed. Perhaps the American intervention in Laos is not as known as the one in Vietnam, but the United States did carry out a similar campaign in Laos, with exhaustive bombing –the United States dropped over two million tons of bombs on Laos– on the territory between 1964 and 1973 (Mason, 2005).

All in all, both Laos and Vietnam present very similar characteristics, such as an increasing nationalist sentiment, the development of hostilities towards the West, the insurgent guerrillas, and the increased communist ideologies.

#### **4) THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Before addressing the question of this thesis, it should be noted that a number of theoretical concepts ought to be explained in order to understand some of the key elements of the academic research that will be discussed in the following sections. Therefore, this part of the thesis will explain and analyze in detail the following theoretical concepts: power, communism in the USSR, the domino theory, and war.

## 4.1 POWER

The two leaders of the opposite blocs during the Cold War craved to achieve power and to be more powerful than the other. More power equaled to being superior and to win. Therefore, in this section, the concept of power will be discussed.

Power has been generally linked to the concepts of sovereignty, hegemony, domination, coercion, discipline, authority, surveillance, and political rule. Power is exercised over others and it is used as to obtain leverage. Power is a possession, is held as a capacity, and can be delegated from a centralized authority (Allen, 2006).

There are two types of power: hard power and soft power. Soft power is a very recent concept as it was a term coined in 1990 by Joseph S Nye Jr. It explains that a country can exercise power by influencing “based on the attraction arising from the positive appeal of the state’s culture, political ideals and policies” (Herr, 2019, p. 9). It is a very interesting concept, but for the purposes of the thesis, this section will focus on hard power, bearing in mind that soft power was not applied during the period that will be covered on the thesis.

Hard power, on the other side, refers to the physical and tangible assets a country uses to impose their superiority. It is generally linked to military capability. Carafano (2016) explains that there are four components that measure military power: first, force structure, i.e. the number and size of units; second, modernization, or the technological development and sophistication of said units; third, unit readiness, or the ability to provide the units required in combat; and fourth, sustainability, as the ability to support the units for as long as they are needed.

This hard power has often been used as deterrence, especially during the Cold War. The increase in the number of nuclear weapons and of countries that have them in their possession has made the principle of deterrence more powerful. As Lieber & Press (2016) described: “When nuclear-armed states face overwhelming conventional threats—or worry about the possibility of catastrophic conventional defeat—they often adopt coercive escalatory doctrines to deter war or stalemate a conflict that erupts” (p. 34).

Moreover, according to the Merriam-Webster dictionary (2020), a superpower is: “an extremely powerful nation. Specifically: one of a very few dominant states in an era when the world is divided politically into these states and their satellites”, as well as “an international governing body able to enforce its will upon the most powerful states”.

Following this definition and the previous explanation of power, the two considered superpowers during the Cold War were the United States and the USSR, and they both exercised their power on their allies and over other territories as a demonstration of superiority.

## 4.2 COMMUNISM IN THE USSR

### *4.2.1 History of communism*

The German philosopher Karl Marx, together with Friedrich Engels, created in February of 1848 the Manifesto of the Communist Party, more well-known as the Communist Manifesto. Throughout the twenty-three pages of this essay-style book, they presented the origins of what will, later on, be applied as the communist and socialist movement. Marx and Engels explained that the current society had evolved into a society divided by classes, in which the lowest class, the large working class, are exploited by a very few number of people from the upper classes.

Lenin, one of the leaders of the revolution in Russia, used this manifesto to lead the battle against the tsar tyranny that had started during the first decade of the 1900s. Throughout those years, Russia went through many changes and, being such a big territory, it was very difficult for everyone to agree. This led to a civil war between every faction with every option for the future of Russia, among them there were Lenin and the Bolsheviks.

When in 1917 the civil war in the soviet territory started, many of the Western European countries started to fear that the revolution would expand to their territories. The new communist movement called for action against the true enemies of the people and thoroughly defended the end of the Great War and the start of a class war. In 1918, countries like France and Great Britain decided to intervene in this civil war, not only out of fear of this revolution expanding to their territories, but also because of Lenin's decision of canceling the great foreign debt that the tsarism had incurred (Pereira, 2008).

Nevertheless, the allied forces were incapable of forming an efficient strategy and of cooperating effectively against the Bolsheviks, so their intervention was simply providing some materials and soldiers on the anti-communist side. The lack of a strong intervention in the country and the unsuccessful results made the allied countries decide to abandon the Russian territories, which will eventually lead to the rise of communism there. The failure of the communist revolution in other countries in Europe, such as Germany or

Hungary, made the whole communist movement focus on its success in the Soviet territories (ibid).

The Bolsheviks finally earned the victory in the year 1920 and a decision had to be made regarding the approach of the communist revolution towards the rest of the world. At first, they attempted a forced socialist system in Poland hoping to get access to Germany, but it led to a complete failure. In the end, they opted for a policy of calculated ambiguity. This meant that if all the Bolsheviks around the world focused on building socialism and if the communist revolution were to succeed in Russia, then it would manage to achieve the international acknowledgment it deserved. This would also avoid a direct confrontation with the capitalist States. It would all in all strengthen the communist position in Europe and, from there, it would be easier for it to expand to the rest of the world. With a stronger position in Russia, they could help those countries with similar ideologies under European colonial power, such as China or India, and would generate a higher instability in the imperialist powers which will then lead to the final capitalism crisis (ibid).

#### *4.2.2 Characteristics of communism*

Once the history of how communism evolved and was implemented in the Russian territory, it is now important to explain what communism defends.

One of the main characteristics that communism maintains is collectivity. This collectivity refers to the fact that a society has to donate every personal belonging for the common wellbeing. Consequently, the communist movement promoted a collective intervention in the economy, collective planning, an equal distribution of resources and wealth (Resnick & Wolff, 2002). The distribution of resources called for the means of production to go back to the hands of the workers. In the Communist Manifesto (2012), Marx and Engels explained that the exploited workers are forced to develop a number of products throughout their working day. In doing so, the workers put a special and personal effort into their creation. Nevertheless, when this product is taken away from them, a part of them is also taken away from them, making the workers feel alienated.

Communism collectivity would not only apply to the economic arena, but also to every aspect of a citizen's life. Regarding culture, collectivity would imply a general sense of equity, fairness, and the wellbeing of every citizen. In political terms, collectivity would bring true democracy where all the power relies on the people (Resnick & Wolff, 2002),

but in practice, all countries which have opted communism have ended with a single-party dictatorship.

Another characteristic of communism, and related to the former one, is classlessness. Both Marx and Engels explained in the Manifesto that the proletariat is suffering from class struggle, which creates inequalities, alienation, and overall disparities in society between the few wealthy and the significant working majority.

#### *4.2.3 Communism applied: Economic policies from 1918 until 1964*

During the Russian Civil War previously addressed that took place between 1918 and 1920, the main economic policy that was applied was war communism, which lasted until 1921. This policy wanted to follow the Communist ideology from scratch and it implied the expropriation of private goods and businesses and the nationalization of the industry. War communism implied the confiscation of any surplus grain produced or any other alimentary products from the peasantry, which were then used by the State (McCauly & Pipes, 2018).

War Communism had a negative impact on the life of the poorest people. The lack of incentives to grow surplus grain and food caused a decrease in its production, with its consequent starvation. Likewise, in the cities, the industries were supervised by untrained bureaucracy, which caused a huge drop in production. This generated a general downturn in the economy, with a decline in wages and increased inflation (ibid).

A general discontent within the population of the USSR quickly spread along the country, which led to the Kronshtadt Rebellion. As a response, Lenin developed the New Economic Policy (NEP) in 1921. The New Economic Policy hoped to improve the system in order to meet the demands of the people that grew with the aftermath of the war. The creation of the NEP was a clear loss to the communist movement because they had to retreat from the socialist ideology and policies in order to not only maintain the party on power but also to prevent the country from a complete breakdown. Some measures that included the NEP were the return of most agriculture, retail trade, and small-scale light industry to private businesses and management. On the other hand, the state retained control over the heavy industry, banking, and foreign trade. Money, which had been prohibited under War Communism, was reintroduced in the economy (ibid).

After the economy was able to recover from the years of war, the industry returned to a more centralized system during the 1930s, turning once again towards the pure

communism and socialism the party leaders sought. When Stalin came into power, he proceeded to the Sovietization of the elites and promoted a strong collectivization of goods. Stalin focused more on creating a strong USSR and having a powerful position in the international arena, therefore leaving aside the economic problems of socialism. When Khrushchev became the leader of the USSR, he focused on the de-Stalinization and the improvement of the country. Despite the fact that he developed some agricultural measures and he attempted to reform the industrial system, the economy of the USSR stayed poor. In 1985, when Gorbachev took the presidency of the country, he proceeded to a series of economic and democratization reforms, looking for greater social justice, promoting more innovation in the economy and moving towards a more open economy in general (ibid).

#### 4.3 DOMINO THEORY

Right after the Second World War came to an end, the whole international arena became divided into two parts. There was the belief that good had overcome evil and “good” was immediately linked to freedom from political oppression and freedom from domination of authoritarian governments (Vesely, 2003). This contributed to a critical simplification of politics in American administration regarding geopolitical reasoning because the whole international arena was divided into friendly and hostile spaces (Dodds, 2003).

For many years, the American administration understood the United States as the center of power of the anti-Soviet system. They also perceived themselves as the ones responsible for the wall of contention to the Soviet expansion. The Soviet Union was their main enemy and their unity had to be completely destroyed and the Kremlin government overthrown in order to succeed (ibid). This perception can be seen throughout the US administrations. This thesis will later on focus on Kennedy’s and Eisenhower’s, but the following ones also maintained this view of the world. For example, President Reagan in his speech to the House of Commons threw the following question: “Must freedom wither in a quiet, deadening accommodation with totalitarian evil?” (1982, para. 4).

Not surprisingly, the fear of the enemy’s expansion throughout the whole international political arena was not a characteristic of solely the American administration. The Soviet Union also perceived capitalism as a dangerous system that had to be stopped and which threatened the security of their territorial borders (Dodds, 2003). Consequently, they also acted as they were responsible for containing the Americans’ hegemony of the world.

Americans accused the Soviet Union of being too aggressive. The communist and socialist system that the Soviet Union was allegedly attempting to impose over the whole world was frequently compared to an illness or a disease, leaving the question aside of whether it had a “cure” or not. Correspondingly, the prime source of infection of this “disease” was the geographical closeness to the Soviet Union and the “infected” territories, or those who had succumbed to communism. Therefore, the proximate countries had not only to stay observant but also ready to fight the spread of socialism (ibid).

Accordingly, there was the belief that the disease would spread to other countries once one of them was infected (ibid). This has also been known as the “domino theory”, whereby if one of the country falls to communism, the surrounding States would also fall as a direct consequence of the former’s fall.

According to Sullivan (1982), the origins of this domino theory could be traced back to William Bullit (1947), a US ambassador in Moscow in times of the Cold War. Bullit transmitted those first fears of the expansion of Soviet powers and their revolution to the rest of the world. Other academics, such as Wiens (1954) and Asprey (1975), addressed the beginnings of the domino theory and tried to explain it. All in all, the seed of fear had already been planted and, due to the academic research around this theory, the American administration began to see it as a strategic necessity, especially regarding Vietnam. Walter Rostow, Deputy National Security Advisor, and Maxwell Taylor, Military Advisor, were the main supporters of the domino theory during the Kennedy administration. President Kennedy, within months of his investiture, already had developed on the idea of the domino theory by projecting it on the news to the American citizens (Sullivan, 1982).

The American interventions pushed by the domino theory consisted of a series of military and economic alliances throughout the world and strategic associations with those governments who seemed were on the verge of communism. The American authorities strongly believed this was the only way to hold it back (Dodds, 2003).

Nevertheless, their main problem was not the strategy, but about how it was carried out. Human rights and its protection were not a priority for the American governments during the Cold War. They deliberately aligned and cooperated with autocratic and military regimes which guaranteed capitalism in order to avoid the fall of that state towards communism. Examples of this behavior can be seen in Latin American governments

(such as Cuban Batista) or the stable political relations South Africa during its apartheid years (ibid).

Due to the fact that the international political space was divided into friendly and hostile areas, the American administration portrayed their citizens an image of being the rescuers and heroes of those “infected”. The American presidents argued publicly that the conflicts in the Third World countries and the former European colonies were an integral share of the struggle of the Soviet Union’s contention. These states had to be saved from communism and the Americans were responsible for that. The intervention in these countries’ internal conflicts was characterized by the operations carried out by the CIA, who continuously sought to overthrow communist or rebellious governments in, for example, Guatemala in 1954, the Dominican Republic in 1965, or Chile in 1973 (ibid).

On the other hand, there were also academics that opposed to this theory. Fitzgerald (1965) explained that the causes of rebellion in these regions were purely nationalistic and that foreign intervention only agitated the feelings of unrest. Therefore, the American presence and their mediation on the situation were generating the pressures and violence they were hoping to contain with the intervention.

In 1967, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara finally recognized his mistakes regarding the domino approach of the American administration by using the example of Indonesia. “The Southeast Asian nations do not constitute lifeless entities that automatically fall one way or another depending on which way their neighbor falls” (Soedjatmoko, 1969 in Sullivan, 1982, p. 70), said a spokesman of the Indonesian government regarding the topic. Nevertheless, it was too late to stop the American intervention in Vietnam when McNamara pronounced himself.

#### 4.4 WAR

Throughout the history of human beings on Earth, war has been present on many different occasions and for many different reasons. Carl von Clausewitz, a Prussian military strategist, addressed the concept of “war” in his book “On War” (1841). He defended that “war is an act of force to compel our enemy to do our will” (p. 75). Clausewitz (1841) continued on this idea and explained that war starts as a direct consequence of an unacceptable political or social situation. Conflicts are a result of groups of politicians, criminals, terrorists, or revolutionaries who are dissatisfied with the current internal or

external circumstances. These circumstances can vary from economic crisis, international diplomacy breakdown, or military intervention.

Furthermore, Gray (2010) on his article regarding war, emphasizes on the fact that war is a continuation of politics: “The purpose of fighting is not to win a military victory, [...] the purpose of fighting is to secure a better place than one enjoyed before” (p. 9).

#### *4.4.1 Intrastate wars and internationalized intrastate wars*

State-based armed conflicts can be defined as those in which a government is one of the belligerents, while intrastate wars are those in which the warring parties are the government and internal opposition groups. Therefore, civil wars are intrastate wars. Intrastate wars, however, differ from traditional wars, also known as interstate wars. These traditional interstate wars imply a direct conflict between two different states.

Nevertheless, in the past decades, there has been a decline in traditional wars for several reasons, among them the increase of non-state actors that generally conform to the opposition to the government or the creation of international agreements which promote cooperation between states. It should also be taken into account the rise of the weapons of mass destruction and its increased destructive power, which has also constituted a major drawback when declaring war to another state (Dosse, 2010).

The British General Rupert Smith and the French General Vincent Desportes denominated the intrastate war as a “war amongst the people” because in intrastate wars the main subjects and objects of the armed conflict are citizens and nonmilitary people. This is another reason why intrastate wars are considered “small wars” in comparison to the “great wars”, because the last ones comprehend an extensive number of state as main actors of the conflict. The main opposition to the state in “small wars” are nongovernmental organizations, which includes opposition revolutionaries, terrorist groups, guerrillas, organized crime syndicates, or even a combination of these. All these different types of groups reunite together under the leadership of a more powerful group whose main objective is to achieve local or national sovereignty (ibid).

In order to do so, they attempt to earn the attributes of the government via elections, violence, corruption, ideological influence, or political promises. Once they attain enough influence and power over a certain territory and its population, they establish political, military, social, and legal institutions through a comprehensive approach. Their struggle to power and freedom is almost a necessity that contributes to earning the hearts and

minds of the population. The national forces which they fight against are usually stronger, not only in terms of military force, but also in political and social power. Consequently, in intrastate wars, nongovernmental actors generally seek the support of transnational alliances with groups with similar ideologies or with states that might be interested in the defeat of the current governmental structure (ibid).

The moment in which a foreign actor comes into the conflict, the intrastate war transforms into an internationalized intrastate war. The intervention from international forces does not generally interfere directly in the current government's way. Instead, international alliances are forged in order for the minority group that is fighting the authorities to have extra material support. They usually receive troops and weapons and other warfare materials, together with military training and strategy knowledge. This support can also be more subtle, such as food and water supplies or medical equipment. During the Cold War era, internationalized intrastate wars were the norm.

Proxy wars have already been addressed in previous points in this thesis (see section 3.1 Cold War).

#### *4.4.2 Limited wars*

The concept of "limited war" refers to a war in which the main objective is to attain the victory in the conflict at minimal military costs. This is a concept that is opposed to the "total wars", which is the traditional form of war in which every resource is put into the arena in order to succeed over the enemy. A limited war also implies limitations regarding the degree of harm, especially concerning the use of nuclear weapons. The Vietnam war falls under this concept, as it was based on guerrilla militias financially supported by the United States.

The main problem of limited wars is the uncertainty and ambiguity of the orders and commands of the military in the field. Rosen (1982) dismisses the traditional definition of limited war as a political war and instead describes limited wars as "strange wars" (p. 83). Rosen explains that the main obstacle in managing limited wars is not the diplomatic uncertainty on how to demonstrate the determination to the enemy, but how to militarily adapt in a quick and efficient way to the battlefield conditions the armed forces will have to face, which will be generally unfamiliar and distinguished. "Diplomatic success will depend on military success" (ibid, p. 83). Thus, bearing in mind the ambiguity of military success, diplomatic success will also be uncertain.

Rosen (1982) presents some factors that could determine whether the military adaptation was successful or not. Among them, we can find the presence or lack of political determination in the main authorities that contribute to an efficient decision-making process regarding military missions and allocation of resources, or the transfer of responsibility to regional commanders. Another important factor would be military courage, especially in the officers, who will have to transmit trust and hope to their soldiers in the early phases of war when there could be no visible results, and who will have to in certain circumstances adopt operational changes when trying new tactics for the unfamiliar scenarios that will risk the lives of their own soldiers.

Limited wars' main objective is political and not military, which is why there is a limitation of resources. Limited wars are "limited" because they deal with smaller problems compared to those found in total wars. Limited wars attempt to reach a fast negotiation and compromise with the enemy instead of its complete physical destruction. Limited wars are a diplomatic instrument and are generally not interested in domestic politics of the country, they comprise a tool for bargaining with the enemy. Accordingly, limited wars entail the challenge of combining the right amount of political power, military power, and diplomacy with other economic and psychological instruments of power, without destroying the population entirely. Osgood (cited in Rosen, 1982) gave a summary of the theory of limited wars when announcing the following "The theory of limited war came to be seen as part of a general 'strategy of conflict' in which adversaries would bargain with each other through the mechanism of graduated military responses [...] in order to achieve a negotiated settlement" (p. 86).

## **5) OBJECTIVES & RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

The objective of this thesis is to understand whether the American implication in the Vietnam War was truly necessary or was simply a question of demonstration of power. The Vietnam War has always been a very interesting subject to study. It is worldwide known as the first defeat of the United States' great power. It lasted for two decades and it is still a very recent and delicate matter in the country. On the other hand, the man that started it, John F. Kennedy, the 35<sup>th</sup> President of the United States, was very much admired and appreciated by his fellow citizens and, even after experiencing the effects of an impossible and never-ending war, JFK is still perceived as an honest, authentic and

virtuous man. Nevertheless, there has been some subtle criticism about his actions regarding Vietnam.

- Did JFK truly believe in domino theory or he was simply looking after American pride?
- Why did JFK decide to involve the United States in Vietnam?
- What were the implications of this decision?
- The hypothesis of this thesis is that Kennedy did believe in domino theory and was also using the war as a demonstration of superiority and the United States' hegemony.

## **6) METHODOLOGIES**

This thesis consists of a case study which focuses on the US intervention in Vietnam during the Kennedy presidency and analyses the decisions that were taken during that period.

The research for this thesis was based mainly on the literature review of different articles, newspapers, academic journals, and books on the matter throughout the period between October 2019 and April 2020. The research for this thesis is based on both primary and secondary sources. The primary sources are mainly the Pentagon Papers from 1967, which include memorandums, official letters inside the cabinet and to the Vietnamese government, official and special programs, reviews, prospects, considerations, conversations from the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and speeches. The documents and archives of the Pentagon Papers used are the ones focused on the periods studied, for instance, primarily Kennedy (1961-1963). Therefore, those regarding the evolution of the war in that period; the *Kennedy Commitments and Programs* of 1961; the *Strategic Hamlet Program 1961-1963*; the *Advisory Build-up, 1961-1967*; and the *Justification of war, public statements of the Kennedy Administration*.

The secondary sources of the literature review vary from a range of different academic databases, such as iFind, JSTOR and EBSCOHOST, to the review of newspaper articles of the time. These can be found in both English and Spanish, but for the purposes of the thesis, together with the weight of the primary forces' language, the whole thesis has been

written in English. All of the sources can be found in the bibliography section at the end of the thesis.

The thesis has been structured in an overall description of the context around the topic in the previous sections (section 3, state of affairs) and by presenting the theoretical framework of some of the ideas used in the thesis (section 4). The analysis in the following section evaluates the research questions listed previously and this dissertation finishes with some conclusions regarding the research.

## **7) ANALYSIS**

### 7.1 BEFORE JFK: EISENHOWER' INFLUENCE

President Dwight David Eisenhower, also referred to as “Ike”, was the 34<sup>th</sup> President of the United States and was in office for two terms, from 1953 to 1961. Eisenhower became widely known for having participated in and leading military campaigns during World War II, as well as for putting an end to the Korean War (Reeves, 2020).

Despite being perceived as a Cold War warrior, he accomplished no substantial domestic reforms. His major achievement, according to McAuliffe (1981), was “in keeping the nation out of war for both his terms in office” (p. 629). Eisenhower had an obsession with the communist threat, but he also understood the importance of the preservation of the national stability and the international status quo, giving him, in retrospect, an image of a prudent president, and even a “hero”. Crable (cited in Scheele, 1987) explains that Eisenhower “became a hero not because he was a warrior or a pacifist, a leader or a common man, a candidate or a non-partisan, or a politician or a non-politician. He was a hero because he – simultaneously and paradoxically – was all of these things” (p. 461).

Eisenhower’s foreign policy was based on containment. After World War II and the Korean War, Eisenhower did not want to risk and commit American troops to a foreign war in Vietnam. He positioned himself against American military action in Vietnam without any external contribution from the international arena. Referring to the Southeast Asia delicate situation, Eisenhower wrote in his personal diary: “I am convinced that no military victory is possible in that kind of theater” (cited in Herring & Immerman, 1984, p. 349). Nevertheless, Eisenhower defended the idea that an American intervention would have positive effects in the territories, that the Southeast Asians could inspire and benefit

from the United States assistance, but for that the South Vietnamese people had to “want to be saved” (Brands, 1985, p. 593).

Being Eisenhower a major supporter of the domino theory –through which it explained the inevitability of neighbor countries falling into communism when one country fell– he could not abandon Vietnam completely. Therefore, he openly supported Vietnamese President Diem and supplied its government with funds, weapons, and military advisors, comprising nearly \$2 billion in aid from 1955 to 1960. By the time President Eisenhower left the office to Kennedy, the situation in Vietnam had escalated. It had evolved to open fighting between the Vietnamese government forces and the Viet Cong insurgents. (Greenspan, 2019).

Eisenhower’s approach to the Vietnam issue certainly had an influence on the way Kennedy decided to –or was forced to– manage the situation. In the first place, even though Eisenhower’s policies were limited in scope, minimum-cost, and were based on containment, at the same time he was increasing the American participation and obligations in Vietnam. When Kennedy came into office, he had already inherited this commitment, as well as an institutional momentum and direction (Hersch, 2014).

Eisenhower’s farewell speech and Kennedy’s inaugural address follow the same premises. For both of them, communism was a global threat to the progress and development of the rest of the free world. Eisenhower (1961) declared that “progress toward these noble goals is persistently threatened by the conflict now engulfing the world”. But he likewise explained that the Americans were capable and had enough power to challenge the threat: “Throughout America's adventure in free government, our basic purposes have been to keep the peace; to foster progress in human achievement, and to enhance liberty, dignity and integrity among people and among nations” (para. 8). Here, Eisenhower explains that the United States’ position and values made America responsible for leading the fights against the communists. Nevertheless, he also expresses his disagreement with those who believe that “some spectacular and costly action could become the miraculous solution to all current difficulties” (para. 10).

While Eisenhower was betting for a longer approach in Vietnam, Kennedy perceived it as a lack of action and movement. This critique can be seen when Kennedy declares in his inaugural speech (1961) that the United States will “pay any price” and “bear any burden” to win the battle “for minds and souls”. Here, Kennedy is differentiating himself

from the former President Eisenhower by stating that governments are capable of actively participate in achieving their purposes.

Hersch (2014) compared the two personalities and explained that: “While both Kennedy and Eisenhower perceive a “total” Cold War and commit to containing the Communist threat, the means and measures each is willing to utilize for containment policy differ” (p. 43). It is important to bear into account that when Kennedy was named President of the United States in 1961, the country went through a generational change, passing from the oldest president elected to the youngest. Kennedy’s team was thorough and confident and the Kennedy administration as a whole was positive their rationality and energy could succeed where Eisenhower had failed. They were filled with the overconfidence of youth. Eisenhower’s administration was unsuccessful because their policies were too vague and focused on the wrong archaic approaches. These were being continuously challenged by the modern geopolitical realities, such as Communism and the guerrilla warfare style. While Eisenhower preferred a more reserved foreign policy, Kennedy believed that the only way to end with Communism and guerrillas was by eliminating the source of the disease via extensive economic and technical assistance. Subsequently, Kennedy opted for a more proactive foreign policy. All in all, Eisenhower had acted following the pattern from the previous president, Truman, and handed the challenge off to Kennedy the same way it was given to him – as a puzzle on how to manage Cold War strategies with the emerging threat of revolutionary wars (Hersch, 2014).

McNamara, the Secretary of Defense during the Kennedy administration, explained in his book *In retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* (1995) some of the reasons that led Kennedy to continue with the domino theory. He explains that, at the time, communism was perceived as an enormous threat to the whole free world. Nikita Khrushchev affirmed “we will bury you” and the Berlin and Cuba cases did not help to raise the United States’ confidence on the matter. McNamara explained that “it seemed obvious that the communist movement in Vietnam was closely related to guerrilla insurgencies in Burma, Indonesia, Malaya, and the Philippines during the 1950s” (chapter 2). They were perceived as a manifestation of a united communist movement seeking hegemony in Southeast Asia.

McNamara was also aware that the Eisenhower administration had just followed Truman’s administration view of communism. In April 1954, Eisenhower pronounced

his famous statement regarding the domino effect on a press conference: “You have a row of dominoes set up, you knock over the first one, and what will happen to the last one is the certainty that it will go over very quickly. So you could have a beginning of a disintegration that would have the most profound influences” (para. 3). He then referred to the loss of Indochina, Burma, Thailand, Indonesia, and other countries in Southeast Asia, arguing that it could potentially advance to Japan, the Philippines, or even Australia. “The possible consequences of the loss are just incalculable to the free world” (para. 9), he asserted.

Even though Eisenhower’s foreign policy was one of containment, he did not hide his thoughts and fears on the Southeast Asia situation, and he efficiently tried to transmit them to future policy-makers, especially Kennedy. McNamara (1995) wrote about the first meeting between the former and the new president in January 1961, in which the main emphasis was put on Indochina. For Eisenhower, the main focus was Laos instead of Vietnam, and he insisted on the domino theory: “if Laos were lost to the communists it would bring an unbelievable pressure to bear on Thailand, Cambodia and South Vietnam” (cited in McNamara, 1995, ch. 2). Laos had become of such importance for the former president that he expressed that as a last hope there should be a unilateral intervention in the country: “we must not allow Laos to fall to the communists, even if it involves war”. McNamara concludes the matter explaining that despite the warnings of communist threats and domino effects, they did not receive any type of deep analysis of the problem nor any ideas of alternative ways to deal with the problem. Their main concern was that if Laos fell, all Southeast Asia would fall.

Eisenhower’s attitude regarding the domino effects of a communist country certainly influenced the way Kennedy decided to manage the situation, especially after the meeting. McNamara (1995) expressed: “This meeting heavily influenced our subsequent approach to Southeast Asia” (ch. 2). It was made clear in Kennedy’s inaugural address (1961), when, following Eisenhower’s ideas, he referred to Vietnam as “keystone to the arch, the finger in the dike[,]... the cornerstone of the Free World in Southeast Asia”. Kennedy inherited an intractable challenge with the communist threat in Southeast Asia, and despite the willingness to make a change in the American foreign policy and a more proactive approach, he was still profoundly influenced by his predecessors’ decisions and ideas.

## 7.2 THE KENNEDY ADMINISTRATION

Kennedy's team, for instance, the people who surrounded him almost every day, played a crucial role in the United States' strategy and they are very important to understand JFK's view of the world and the actions he took for the United States.

First of all, Robert Kennedy was his brother and one of his main pillars, as he was named Attorney General. They both worked very closely as an unbreakable and powerful team. He played a crucial role in the Cuban missile crisis in 1962, negotiating with the Soviets and developing the blockade strategy (JFK Library, n.d.). Regarding Vietnam, at first Robert Kennedy had no problems showing how positive he was about the war in Vietnam being an easy win, "we are going to win in Vietnam" (cited in Beck, 1974, p. 51). Robert Kennedy truly believed in the power of an efficient counterinsurgency and worked hard in the Vietnam one. In the office, he was regarded as "Mr. Counter-insurgency". In 1962, Robert Kennedy encouraged and supported the United States' participation in Vietnam. This was the time when he declared "the solution lies in our winning it, we will remain here until we do" (cited in Cutbirth, 1976, p. 47). He was very supportive of the intervention in Vietnam and encouraged his brother to maintain his position. He also actively participated in the creation of military plans and strategies. Nevertheless, years later he ended up admitting in 1968 that "the effort was doomed from the start" (cited in Beck, 1974, p. 51).

The Kennedy's administration Secretary of State was Dean Rusk, who had served before in other important positions such Director of the Office of Special Political Affairs, Assistant Secretary of State for International Organization Affairs, Deputy Under Secretary of State, and Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs. His role was of being an advisor to the President. His view of the world in the 1960s was of a revolutionary one, in which the United States' foreign policy is crucial. For him, the US foreign policy should promote modernity and democracy in emerging countries and provide them with humanitarian aid. He believed in "dignified diplomacy", with special emphasis on civility and communication, and played an important role in the tensions of the Cuban Missile Crisis and in the negotiations towards a nuclear test ban (Glass, 2017).

He was a true supporter of the domino theory, once in a press conference when asked about the American national security was really at stake in Vietnam, he replied "within the next decade or two, there will be a billion Chinese on the mainland armed with a nuclear weapon, with no certainty about what their attitude toward the rest of Asia will

be” (cited in Glass, 2017, para. 4). Rusk used to repeat that the United States was committed to South Vietnam (Pace, 1995) and that it could not be left alone.

National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy is known for having played an important role regarding the Vietnam War. Being also a supporter of the domino theory, his policy decisions always encouraged an expansion of the US involvement in Vietnam. If South Vietnam fell, “there would be a great weakening in the free societies in their ability to withstand Communism” (cited in Kifner, 1996, para. 6). He continued in office after JFK’s assassination and, after visiting Vietnam himself, his rejection and hatred towards North Vietnam and communism only intensified. “The best available way of increasing our chance of success in Vietnam is the development and execution of a policy of sustained reprisal against North Vietnam”, he wrote in his memorandum (ibid, para. 32). Nevertheless, even though he knew that a policy of sustained reprisal could not be successful, he still believed it would be worth it because it would show America’s willingness to fight this kind of movement as well as he hoped it would prevent future insurgents from trying. He was certain that “unlimited commitment in Vietnam was justified” (cited Beck, 1974, p. 60). McGeorge Bundy was seen as both a brilliant and aggressive man.

General Maxwell Taylor was named Military Advisor for the Kennedy administration and was, later on, Ambassador to South Vietnam. He is known for being one of the most influential personalities in the United States’ military and diplomatic intervention in Southeast Asia. After visiting Vietnam in 1961 under a mission to study the communist threat, he recommended a stronger presence of the United States in the country through the deployment of troops. He was the one in charge regarding the launching of the air campaign against North Vietnam.

Years later, in 1984, he listed the three most important lessons he considered America should learn from Vietnam. “The first is that before we ally ourselves to another country, we must ascertain to what extent they can exploit our help” (cited in Krebs, 1987, para. 10), he said while criticizing the wasted efforts on the country. The second lesson was “we should declare war” (ibid, para. 11). And the third lesson involved the media: “you should never let television on the battlefield” (ibid, para.11). General Taylor complained that “in Vietnam, there was the feeling on the part of some of the press that their task was to destroy the American command and to work against what was being done” (ibid, para. 13).

Theodore Sorensen was JFK's speechwriter and special counsel. He helped him shape and write the best texts for each situation. With phrases like: "Ask not what your country can do for you – ask what you can do for your country" (Kennedy, 1961), Sorensen added an idealistic touch to JFK's realism. They were perceived as "an odd, but utterly compatible duo" (The Guardian, 2010, para. 9). Despite their opposing personalities, they were able to cooperate efficiently in order to manage the government and promote the development of the United States. Sorensen knew JFK's personality very well and always said what he needed to listen to. "Kennedy had plenty of yes-men. He needed a no-man from time to time" (Weiner, 2010, para. 9). Even Robert Kennedy himself acknowledged Sorensen's job: "If it was difficult," Robert Kennedy said, "Ted Sorensen was brought in" (cited in the Weiner, 2010, para. 9).

Sorensen used to help JFK in difficult situations, for example, he encouraged JFK to reach an agreement with the Soviets before attacking them in the Cuban missile crisis. Moreover, he was the one who carefully wrote the response to the Soviets regarding the withdrawal of the US missiles in Turkey in the attempt to persuade during the Cuban missile crisis (The Guardian, 2010). He also played an important role in Vietnam, especially when writing speeches to justify the government's actions in the country.

Nevertheless, it was Robert McNamara, the Secretary of Defense, one of the main actors regarding the decisions taken for Vietnam. The press named the Vietnam war "McNamara's war" for a reason. Despite not being the first supporter of the domino theory and the intervention in Vietnam, he played a crucial role in Kennedy's administration. He came from the business world and Kennedy hoped that thanks to that he would be able to bring some management techniques to the military (Beck, 1974).

Years later, he admitted the Vietnam war was a mistake in his book *In Retrospect*, but McNamara will always be held responsible by the public for it, as he embodied the gradual evolution of the United States' foreign policy from "cocky interventionism to cost-conscious realism" (Frankel, 1995, para. 1).

In opposition to General Taylor's lessons, McNamara (1995) listed 11 lessons the United States should learn from Vietnam which implied a much deeper analysis of the situation. Among them, McNamara explains that the United States misjudged, underestimated the power, failed to recognize some technological limitations, were ignorant of the culture, did not explain what was going on, failed to recognize Americans are not omniscient,

erred in taking unilateral military action, failed to recognize that some problems do not have immediate solutions, and failed to organize effectively.

Robert McNamara (1995) explained that the US foreign policy in Vietnam was contradictory because they acted following two opposing premises. On the one hand, that “the fall of South Vietnam to communism would threaten the security of the US and the Western World”, and on the other hand that “only the South Vietnamese could defend their nation, and that America should limit its role to providing training and logistical support” (chapter 2).

All in all, McNamara recognized that neither he nor anyone on the team was an Asian expert. Even though the whole administration worked eagerly on Vietnam, no one in the Kennedy administration understood or appreciate Southeast Asian culture, history, language, or values. “When it came to Vietnam, we found ourselves setting policy for a region that was terra incognita” (ch. 2). Additionally, the US government lacked experts on the subject that would compensate for this lack of knowledge. “Without men like these to provide sophisticated, nuanced insights we – certainly I – badly misread China’s objectives” (ch. 2). McNamara asserted that if Kennedy had not been assassinated, the US intervention in Vietnam would not have intensified (Beck, 1974).

Despite this, when serving in the Kennedy administration, all of these men acted fiercely and advised President Kennedy to increment US involvement in the Vietnam War. For example, when a report written by McNamara and General Taylor in 1963, explained that the military campaign was progressing correctly. It also showed dissatisfaction with how Diem or Nhu were leading the country and its increasing unpopularity, which could threaten the loyalty of the Vietnamese soldiers to the regime. This memorandum recommended a general increase of the military action, both in the number of troops and in training assistance.

Consequently, Kennedy did not only trust and was influenced by all of the members of his team, but they were all highly confident in Vietnam and oblivious to the obvious mistakes they were committing. Their main worry was the domino theory and avoiding South Vietnam’s fall into communism, the rest could wait.

### 7.3 JFK'S PERSONALITY, PUBLIC IMAGE & PUBLIC JUSTIFICATION OF WAR

John Fitzgerald Kennedy demonstrated to be a power-driven young man. Since the very beginning of his political career he fought against his rivals in order to get to the highest point. In a country which had recently left the World War II disaster and was entering into the Cold War era, he wanted to demonstrate that the new generations could take responsibilities and contribute to the new international arena's politics by providing new solutions and ideas to the social and political issues at the time. During his early campaigns in Boston, his whole team worked hard day and night to achieve their goals.

JFK's strategy as a candidate was to always portray himself as a charismatic and close-to-its-people leader, making the people feel like he was always accessible and open to talk about whatever was needed. To the Boston citizens, he presented himself in a very humble way, he was the average American who had participated in the war and who had also suffered its consequences like every other person in the United States. For example, he had also had some friends and family who unfortunately passed away during the war (Rus, 2017).

Kennedy's will to be close to his voters meant approaching them during the campaign, giving hugs, kissing babies and shaking hands. He wanted to let everybody know he was there for the people, to help them. His charisma and proximity to the people helped him earn the minds and the hearts of many US citizens. He was very far from being an opportunistic leader, instead he was someone who was loyal to his country and was fighting for his principles. Kennedy was seen as a leader who was keen on serving his community, as an average American who represented the people of the whole country, far from the common image of a politician who just wants to indoctrinate the citizens, because he addressed the topics that the citizens wanted to hear about (ibid).

The Americans wanted peace and a strong position of the US in the world, a political and social stability that could last as long as possible. Consequently, JFK planned his speeches and his actions based on the citizens' needs. His programs and projects all had as main objective the improvement of all the Americans, both as individuals and as part of a society. This way, JFK made all the American participants of the international situation. He explained through his speeches that they had to feel the leaders and responsible for how the world was shaping (ibid). "Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country" (1961, para. 25), he said in his inaugural speech in 1961.

Regarding politics, Kennedy defined himself as a liberal who wanted to maintain a strong political position in the international arena. He defended that a democracy will always guarantee that the individuals are the main actors of the political processes, the citizens are the owners of their destiny (Rus, 2017). Many liberals, such as Ernest K. Lindley, indeed followed him. They regarded Kennedy as a promising leader, exceptional and outstanding. James Michener considered him “a very able man with a brilliant mind, substantial courage, an enormous sense of history, and an attractive personality, cold perhaps but reassuring” (cited in Beck, 1974, p. 46).

Nevertheless, Beck (1974) explains that Kennedy’s public image was reinforced and magnified after his assassination, but still challenged with the afflicting Vietnam war. While Sorenson applauded that “he stood for excellence in an era of indifference” (ibid, p. 49), there are still many Americans who do not agree with the common idealized public image of Kennedy. For example, Eleanor Roosevelt said that he was “someone who understands what courage is and admires it, but has not quite the independence to have it” (ibid, p. 46). There was a general belief among the people that he simply won the elections because the other option was Nixon. For instance, Richard Walton said: “We were all so eager for Kennedy to defeat the despised Nixon that we just assumed that what he said was acceptable... blinded by our passion to defeat Nixon, we did not really listen to Kennedy” (ibid, p. 51).

Kennedy was also sometimes portrayed by the opposition press as someone who lacked enough strength to confront the communist threat. The Bay of Pigs issue, the building of the Berlin Wall, or the Soviet sputnik left a feeling of insecurity among the Americans. *The Progressive* pointed out that Kennedy displayed “a disturbing absence of deep commitment to and involvement in the progressive programs he was proposing, a seeming lack of fighting faith in his principles and a willingness to reach accommodation and compromise even before the battle began” (ibid, p. 47).

Even though Sorenson defended Kennedy’s policy of Vietnam as a way to hold back communist guerrillas and “to permit the local population peacefully to choose its own future” (ibid, p. 50), the implications of the Vietnam War has been often portrayed, by historians such as Arthur Schlesinger Jr, as “his great failure in foreign affairs” (ibid, p. 50).

Kennedy’s vision of the world has been perceived as “noble and inspirational” (Hersh, 2014, p. 34). He portrayed Vietnam as a part of a critical domino situation and believed

that the country would not be able to fight against communism on its own, therefore he used to acclaim the responsibility of the United States' involvement in the name of the rest of the free world (Beck, 1974). "Our great responsibility is to be the chief defender of freedom in this time of maximum danger. Only the US has the power and the resources and the determination. We have committed ourselves to the defense of dozens of countries [...] who look for independence", he addressed in Chicago in 1961 (Pentagon papers, 1967d, p. c-9).

Kennedy repeated these ideas in multiple times in order to call attention to how important Vietnam was for the United States. "The threat is not just military; it is also political", he said, and as a supporter of the domino theory, he added that "the United States is determined that communism shall not take over Asia" (Pentagon papers, 1967d, p. c-34). There are several occasions in which President Kennedy has publicly admitted that he believed in the domino theory. In a News Conference in 1963, he said "in my opinion, for us to withdraw from that effort would mean a collapse not only of South Vietnam, but Southeast Asia" (Pentagon papers, 1967d, p. c-37). Furthermore, when he was directly asked about the theory in an NBC Interview in 1963, he answered "I believe it. I think the struggle is close enough" (Pentagon papers, 1967d, p. c-42).

Moreover, as a charismatic leader, however, Kennedy always tried to explain the American citizens where his mind was. In his speeches, he was very clear and direct to his fellow Americans and always knew how to ask what from them. For example, he pronounced some scary thoughts to the listeners of a speech addressed on Cold War education by saying that "the immediate goal of the Communists is [...] to capture the in-between nations, those smaller and weaker nations which today are struggling against odds to remain independent" (Pentagon papers, 1967d, p. c-34). Nevertheless, he continued to explain calmly that if any of the countries surrounding Vietnam were attacked, such as Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, or Thailand, as an ally, the United States is committed to help defend it. The United States had bilateral security agreements with these countries and therefore an obligation to defend them. He went on to ask the Americans to have steady nerves: "if the US is not only going to meet the communist threat but carry off the difficult task of helping create a new and stable world in the process, then Americans are going to need very steady nerves" (ibid, p. c-35). He finished the address with some words of hope: "We are cooperating in with many free peoples in great efforts at nation-building" (ibid, p. c-36). It was clear that Kennedy knew he was a

great public speaker and used to in his advantage. The speech that has been put as an example goes through fear, logic, and hope in very few pages. This way, he gave a trustworthy image, which was very beneficial for legitimizing his actions in Vietnam.

#### 7.4 DOMINO THEORY: A TRUE THREAT?

Probably due to the influence of previous policy-makers, the Kennedy administration truly feared the domino effects in Southeast Asia and quickly began planning action in the area. For example, Walter Rostow, Deputy National Security Advisor, and Maxwell Taylor, military advisor were the main supporters of domino theory to the rest of the Joint Chiefs of Staff of the Kennedy administration, and thanks also to the Eisenhower warnings, they easily converted the rest, including McNamara, to this perspective. Within months of his inauguration address, President Kennedy had already elaborated on the domino effects in a news conference as well as initiated plans following the domino theory.

In May 1961, President Kennedy wrote a letter to Vice-President Johnson regarding the situation. The first one thoroughly expressed the importance of uniting forces in Southeast Asia or else assume the American surrender of the Pacific, “We should consider an alliance of all the free nations of the Pacific and Asia who are willing to join forces in defense of their freedom” (Pentagon papers, 1976c p. 163) Nevertheless, Kennedy was confident about having positive results if in each country it is built a stable structure that could fight the communist insurgency.

In the Kennedy Programs and Commitments register of the Pentagon Papers (1967b), five issues are addressed regarding how they were going to affect the American policy towards Vietnam, and all of the issues have a direct or indirect relation to the domino theory. The first, “The Viet-Cong insurgency” and the second issue, “Problems with Diem’s government” only display the instability of the country, which implies higher tendencies to a fall towards communism. The third, “Problems with the Soviets”, and the fourth, “The situation in Laos” are a direct reference to communist fears. And the fifth issue, the “Special American Commitment to Vietnam”, presents the feeling of being responsible to lead by example of the American government.

The situation in Laos is described as “where the Western position was in the process of falling apart as Kennedy took office” (Pentagon Papers, 1967b, p. 6). Even though the

Eisenhower administration was giving aid to the pro-American faction in the country, the communist factions were receiving assistance from the Soviets in a much more effective way. It is stated that since it was “obvious” the communist would get control, this would mean a “direct security threat for Thailand and Vietnam”. The report insists on the direct effects of the Laos issue spilling over onto its neighbor Vietnam. The proposed plan of action in May 1961 focused on, in case a loss of Laos to the communist, securing the borders with Vietnam in order to avoid insurgents from Laos as well as the creation of a viable and democratic society in South Vietnam. Cambodia was also another country that the American administration feared would fall to communism so they sought cooperation between Cambodia and Vietnam to fight the insurgents.

Despite being the first focus of America’s foreign policy in Laos and Cambodia, it quickly shifted towards fears of Vietnam. “The government’s most immediate source of anxiety is that the Communist inroads neighboring Laos and Cambodia may result in a Communist encirclement of South Vietnam” (Pentagon papers, 1967c, p. 282). On the one hand, by 1961 there had already been border incidents with Cambodia, as well as financial claims and political conspiracies. Moreover, despite being confident about being able to maintain Vietnam out of the communist insurgents, the threat of a communist Laos could change the situation.

The fear of the domino theory coming to an effect progressively increased through the months of Kennedy in the office. In a Memorandum for the Secretary of Defense written in January 1962 titled “The Strategic Importance of the Southeast Asia Mainland” (ibid, p. 448), the small risk and the belief of almost impossibility of a fall of Vietnam to communism had transformed into a real threat. “It must be recognized that the fall of South Vietnam to communist control would mean the eventual communist domination of all of the Southeast Asia mainland” (ibid, p. 448). It proposes a reasoning of the following countries that would succumb to communism. In the first place, after Vietnam, Thailand would be next because a communist framework with a land reform is being established. Then, after Thailand, its neighbors “pink” Burma and a “vacillating” Cambodia would easily fall under communist pressure. Malaya, which is the single determined opposition to the communist movement would be left completely isolated as communism in Singapore is strong.

The memorandum continues explaining that once mainland Southeast Asia has fallen, the military threat for the United States would exponentially increase. The Indonesian

archipelago could be used under Soviet domination as a military base, which will consequently pose a threat to New Zealand and Australia. The USSR would then bear control of almost the whole eastern Indian Ocean, where the Philippines and Japan, would, at best, remain neutral after pressures. Korea, Okinawa, and Taiwan would have to be careful and the neutrality of India would certainly be jeopardized. After that, the Soviet bloc would be expected to try to control the African continent.

Ergo, the political considerations of the Kennedy administration encompass a series of recommendations in which the Joint Chiefs of Staff expect the US to reaffirm its position and gather its forces in preventing the loss of South Vietnam to the communists in order to avoid Soviet domination of Southeast Asia and all it implies. The memorandum warns that, while the Cuba issue has opened the doors to Central and South America to the Soviets, Vietnam would entail the entry of the Sino-Soviet bloc into the rest of Asia, the Pacific, and, potentially, Africa.

There is no doubt that the domino theory was taken as a serious threat by the Kennedy administration. “The development in the Laotian crisis and its outcome have a profound impact on [the Southeast Asian countries’] future” (Pentagon papers, 1967b, p. 22). In a News Conference in April 1963, when asked about the domino theory, Kennedy admitted “there is an interrelationship in these countries” after explaining that in the case Laos were to be lost to communism, “it would increase the danger along the northern frontiers of Thailand. It would put additional pressure on Cambodia and [...] on South Vietnam which in itself would put additional pressure on Malaya” (Pentagon papers, 1967d, p. c-30).

There have been analysts who have rejected the domino theory. Sullivan, (1982) describes domino as “an artificially contrived state of unstable equilibrium for the dynamic symmetry of its response to a perturbation. Potential energy is imparted by standing the pieces on their ends aligned so that each strikes the next as it falls” (p. 71). Nevertheless, he dismisses the domino theory in geopolitics. For example, he mentions the Indonesian government objecting against it and feeling offended by its premises. After being able to block the communist insurgency in the country without American assistance or intervention, the Indonesians proved the domino theory’s misconception. Their spokesman expressed in 1969: “The Southeast Asian nations do not constitute lifeless entities that automatically fall one way or another depending on which way their neighbor falls. What matters is [...] the determination of a nation to preserve its own identity”

(Soedjatmoko cited in Sullivan, 1982, p. 70). The Indonesian government criticized the domino theory for representing an oversimplification of the natural history processes that countries go through.

Years later after serving in office, McNamara (1995) admitted their mistakes regarding this theory. “We underestimated the nationalist aspect of Ho Chi Minh’s movement” (ch. 2) because they were relating this leader to the Cuban revolution leader, Fidel Castro. This, together with a lack of knowledge on the subject, created ill-founded judgments that were “accepted without debate” by the Kennedy administration. An Australian historian who had lived in China, Fitzgerald (1965, cited in Sullivan, 1982), explained that the reason why the region of Southeast Asia was so uncertain and unstable was due to nationalism, and nationalisms are aggravated with foreign participation in the matter. Consequently, an American intervention based on domino theory premises would end up generating the forces it aimed to contain.

## 7.5 WERE THE SECURITY AND DEFENSE MEASURES TAKEN SUCCESSFUL?

### *7.5.1 Counterinsurgency plans*

Only 10 days after being elected the 35th President of the United States, John F. Kennedy started working on counterinsurgency plans for South Vietnam. On January 30, 1961, he approved an increase of expenditure of \$28.4 million for sending 20,000 soldiers to South Vietnam as well as “an increase in expenditure of \$12.7 million for a program to improve the quality of the Vietnam civil guard” (Pentagon Papers, 1967c, p. 13) (see Annex 3). Secretary of State Dean Rusk developed on the plan emphasizing on a higher degree of cooperation between the US and the Vietnamese governments. This counterinsurgency plan also mentions the importance of border control with Cambodia as well as providing training and equipment to the Vietnamese’ government forces.

In May 1961, a more elaborated Program of Action for Vietnam was composed. Its main objective was “to prevent communist domination of South Vietnam” (Pentagon Papers, 1967c, p. 70). It provides an analysis of the situation and an exhaustive program of action divided into different areas, such as military control, political, economic, funding, psychological, organizational, and internal support. The program overall focuses on the development of a stable political and economic situation which would have positive effects as it would create a strong and widespread support not only among political leaders

but also among peasants and a natural rejection of communism. Militarily, it mainly concentrates on increasing support to Vietnamese forces by providing training assistance, as the US administration believed that “the concept of using local police force to combat local insurgency is politically and diplomatically attractive” (Pentagon Papers, 1967c, p. 324).

US military intervention in South Vietnam was mainly focused on helping South Vietnam constrain the communist movement, and it continuously emphasizes on creating a solid scenario with the correct conditions for this to take place. “We intend to intensify our efforts for a struggle in many ways more difficult than war”, he once expressed (Pentagon papers, 1967d, p. c-8). The Strategic Hamlet Program was elaborated as the backbone of this process.

#### *7.5.2 The Strategic Hamlet Program (1961-1963)*

The Strategic Hamlet Program was the main line of action of the United States in Vietnam from 1961 to 1963. In broad terms, the strategy consisted of pacifying rural Vietnam as well as it attempted to build rural support to the central government of Vietnam, led by Ngo Dinh Diem (see Annex 4). A “hamlet” consists of a small organized community situated in Vietnam’s countryside. A village is formed by three to five hamlets. Therefore, this program was tailored for the Vietnamese peasants in the agricultural sectors of the country.

The conception of this program was not entirely new, for the French government whilst during their administration of Vietnam had already designed programs regarding the resettlement of peasants and the development of “secured zones”, for instance, loyal to the administration. These resettlement schemes pursued a major control over the Vietnamese peasants and over the rural populations. The Agrovillage might be an example of these programs. Nevertheless, these programs were clumsy and dishonest, consequently, they never succeeded and the Vietnamese population did not have a good impression of these kinds of projects.

The situation at the end of 1961 did certainly not contribute to an improvement of the rural areas’ circumstances. The Viet Cong was progressively achieving more power and implementing a communist rule and their military methods were based on guerrillas. By November 1961, it is estimated this group had grown up to 17,000 militants, which were

responsible for the deaths of over 500 local officials and civilians and 1,500 RVNAF soldiers (see Annex 5).

A series of conferences between the United States and the government of Vietnam aimed at creating a program that would help improve the situation. At first, the Americans stated an increase of 150,000 men in the Vietnamese' Air Force (RVNAF), as well as declared to support the Civil Guard with military assistance funds and assistance regarding health and public work activities, but it also explained the two governments needed to deeply discuss for new measures both in social and economic areas to counteract the Viet Cong's guerrillas.

The American General Maxwell D. Taylor, during a visit to Southeast Asia in October 1961, wrote a report analyzing the Viet Cong threat, and the strengths and weaknesses of the Vietnam government. He suggested in his report an American strategy for "turning the tide and for assuming the offensive in Vietnam" (cited in Pentagon Papers, 1967a, p. 5). General Taylor stressed the importance not of the use of the military force to hold the nation, but on the cooperation with non-military actions in order to provoke a political crisis that would call for the creation of a new group that would unify the country. General Taylor's presented a strategy which aimed to strengthen President Diem's position as well as to broaden the participation of the United States in the matter in the hope of creating the reforms that Diem's regime needed.

In his report, General Taylor introduced the idea of adopting a limited partnership with Vietnam's government. This way, American advisors must act "as friends and partners – not as arms-length advisors – show them how the job might be done – not tell them or do it for them" (Pentagon Papers, 1967a, p. 7). The objective of this partnership was to force the Vietnamese people to take action for themselves by providing increased material assistance. Moreover, Thomson, a British military officer focused on counter-insurgencies, supported this idea of avoiding the complete destruction of the Viet Cong forces. Instead, Thomson, stressed the fact that the Americans should offer an appealing alternative to communism, and he especially emphasized on the national reconstruction and development of agricultural areas.

This idea of partnership had already been adopted by the US in, for example, the Counterinsurgency Plan for Viet-Nam (CIP), designed in the late 1960. The CIP represented an attempt to designate different roles and establish specific relations regarding the counterinsurgency efforts of the government of Vietnam. The plan failed to

coordinate and organize effectively the Vietnamese forces, but the Geographically Phased National Level Operation Plan for Counterinsurgency, published in September 1961, tried to correct the mistakes of the CIP. This plan focused on specifying certain areas of interest in the pacification process in a three-phase strategy. The first phase, the preparatory phase, involved collecting data, doing surveys, and analyze the economic and political reforms needed in target areas. The second phase, the military phase, concerned establishing the central government's presence by clearing the area and handing security to the Civil Guards. The third and last phase, the security phase, implied that the Self Defense Corps would assume the mission of civil security, control would pass over to the peasants, and start the economic and social programs to consolidate Diem's government. The plan was conceived in a three-year geographically phased line: in 1962, the priority was six provinces in the outskirts of Saigon, in 1963 it predicted a southward expansion into the Delta, and in 1964, the control of the highlands. Nevertheless, the progress in a phase-plan is difficult to assess. Determining whether a hamlet was secure, or that there was progress in it was ambiguous and subjective, and the Americans used its ambiguity to their advantage. Years later, McNamara (1995) himself would admit the burden and held himself responsible for the poorly handled assessment of the progress. The military were hesitant on how to measure progress and started to calculate it via quantitative means, for example the enemy casualties –the infamous “body counts”.

The US military advisors did not agree with a less aggressive strategy as they believed Vietnam's problem was more military than political, as opposed to the US political leaders who were more concerned about the political issues of the country. President Diem continued to remain reluctant and avoided clear responses to the plan as it implied losing power over the country in favor of the Americans. Unfortunately, he was facing the dilemma of needing US support to stay in power but at the same time avoiding being perceived as an American puppet.

The plan was formally presented to President Diem in November 1961, and the Americans' willingness to start military progress led to the first counterinsurgency effort in March 1962, the so-called “Operation SUNRISE” in Binh Duong Province situated north of Saigon. The Plan had a bad start and this operation proved it. Only 70 families were persuaded to volunteer for resettlement, while other 135 were forced to leave their dwellings. The money invested which was supposed to be given to the families was withheld out of fear that the families would run away. Moreover, out of the 200 families,

there were only 120 men of military age, which could suggest that the rest had escaped to join the Viet Cong.

The strategy continued over the Delta region and strategic hamlets were placed in an uncoordinated and almost discordant pattern. And in August 1962, the Vietnam government announced there had been progress on the pacification hamlet program, with over 2,500 hamlets completed and 2,500 more in progress (see Annex 6). Nevertheless, the Pentagon Papers estimate that it was due more to Diem's aggressive techniques and that in reality it caused higher resentment if not active resistance from the peasants. While the United States focused on giving an attractive alternative to communism, Diem was more worried over having the population loyal and under control. He was trying to "impose loyalty from the top [...] rather than to build it from the bottom" (p. iv), and that could be one of the reasons for the Buddhist rebellion. President Diem's unwillingness to meet American demands grew with time because he feared his government would fall.

Apart from the fact that the Strategic Hamlet Program failed because of over-expansion of construction, hamlets situated in insecure areas, and poor quality of defense, the United States considered that the deterioration of the situation was almost entirely the responsibility of the President Diem's government organization. The Americans encouraged a stronger and more effective military chain of command that would help improve cooperation, but Diem's fear of losing power led to a situation in which there was poor coordination and imperfect cooperation in data collection, in planning and in operational execution.

Nevertheless, in the hypothetical case that Diem had followed US orders, it is highly probable that the plan would have failed. There is no evidence that implies it was all due to Diem's denial of American demands. The plan was flawed in its conception and foredoomed to failure.

"The story of the Strategic Hamlet Program [...] is one in which an operational concept specifying a sequence of concrete steps was introduced by an articulate advocate, nominally accepted by all of the principal actors, and advanced to a position of apparent centrality in which it became *the* operational blueprint for ending the insurgency. But it is also the story of an apparent consensus built on differing, sometimes competing expectations and of an effort which was, in retrospect, doomed by the failure to resolve in one context the problem it was designed to alleviate in another – the problem of the GVN [Government of Vietnam] stability." (Pentagon Papers, 1967a, p. 4)

## 8) CONCLUSIONS

The Vietnam War has been remembered as one of the most disastrous events in the history of US foreign policy. After years of sending troops and equipment to the country with dreadful results, the United States had to leave the battlefield with no victory in sight. The first president who decided to send troops to South Vietnam was John F. Kennedy. This thesis has proven the initial hypothesis of President Kennedy having taken the decision towards a higher American intervention in Vietnam following the domino theory in order to demonstrate American hegemony.

After World War II, the geopolitical arena was left divided into two blocs, the communists and the so-known free world. Most Americans in the high elites were worried about an expansion of the Soviet power and felt seriously threatened by their position. Even though President Eisenhower did not make any decisions regarding the involvement of the United States in another war, he did plant the seed in Kennedy's mind. In the meeting they had, Eisenhower put special emphasis on Southeast Asia, the communist threat, and the domino theory.

The Kennedy administration also influenced the way the President acted and took decisions. Kennedy surrounded himself by many of his most trustworthy partners and all of them believed in the domino theory and encouraged the President for further participation of the US in Vietnam. A whole new cabinet full of young, fierce men did contrast with the precedent Eisenhower's administration, which was portrayed by the new ones as obsolete and incapable of dealing with the new threats of the new geopolitical order. Secretary of Defense, Robert McNamara, later admitted for that office to be full of people who were completely ignorant of Southeast Asia culture, history or values.

Both Eisenhower and the Kennedy administration team heavily influenced the way JFK portrayed the world and reacted to the upcoming problems. Nevertheless, Kennedy was still a strong and charismatic leader, who won the loyalty of the Americans throughout the years. He was a confident man who fought for what he believed was right and never hesitated with Vietnam. He always showed he was certain about the domino theory and continued to reassure his ideas in almost every speech he pronounced.

The actions and decisions the Kennedy administration made were always following the principle of the domino theory, through which if Vietnam fell to communism, all the surrounding countries would also fall and would have disastrous results. The domino

theory, however, has not been proven. Even though the whole American foreign policy based its decisions on the domino theory, up until today there is still open debate on whether the theory was truly valid (see Sullivan, 1982). What several politicians and historians have come to admit after so many years, such as McNamara himself, was that in the case of Vietnam, what was perceived as communist insurgency, was in reality a nationalistic movement, and that American persistence in the matter probably aggravated the situation.

The security and defense measures taken by the Kennedy administration were based on good hope. The United States was looking for the South Vietnamese people to defend themselves and, via the Strategic Hamlet Program (1961-1963), their goal was to create a solid social, political and economic structure that would modernize and democratize the population. This would directly make them reject communist ideas and propaganda. Nevertheless, good intentions are usually not enough, and the whole plan was ill-conceived from the start. Captain Robert O'Neill, an intelligence officer, wrote "the final outcome of this war, will be determined by the feelings of the Vietnamese people. No purely military victory, however overwhelming, can provide a permanent solution unless the victory is won by the side whom the people favor" (cited in Ekins, 2016, p. 15). In addition to this problem, Diem's regime needed US intervention but still wanted to impose its will and avoid being an American puppet. This, together with the fact that the Kennedy administration was almost completely oblivious of the Vietnamese history, culture, and values, implied that the program and the whole American intervention in the Vietnam war was foredoomed to failure almost from the beginning.



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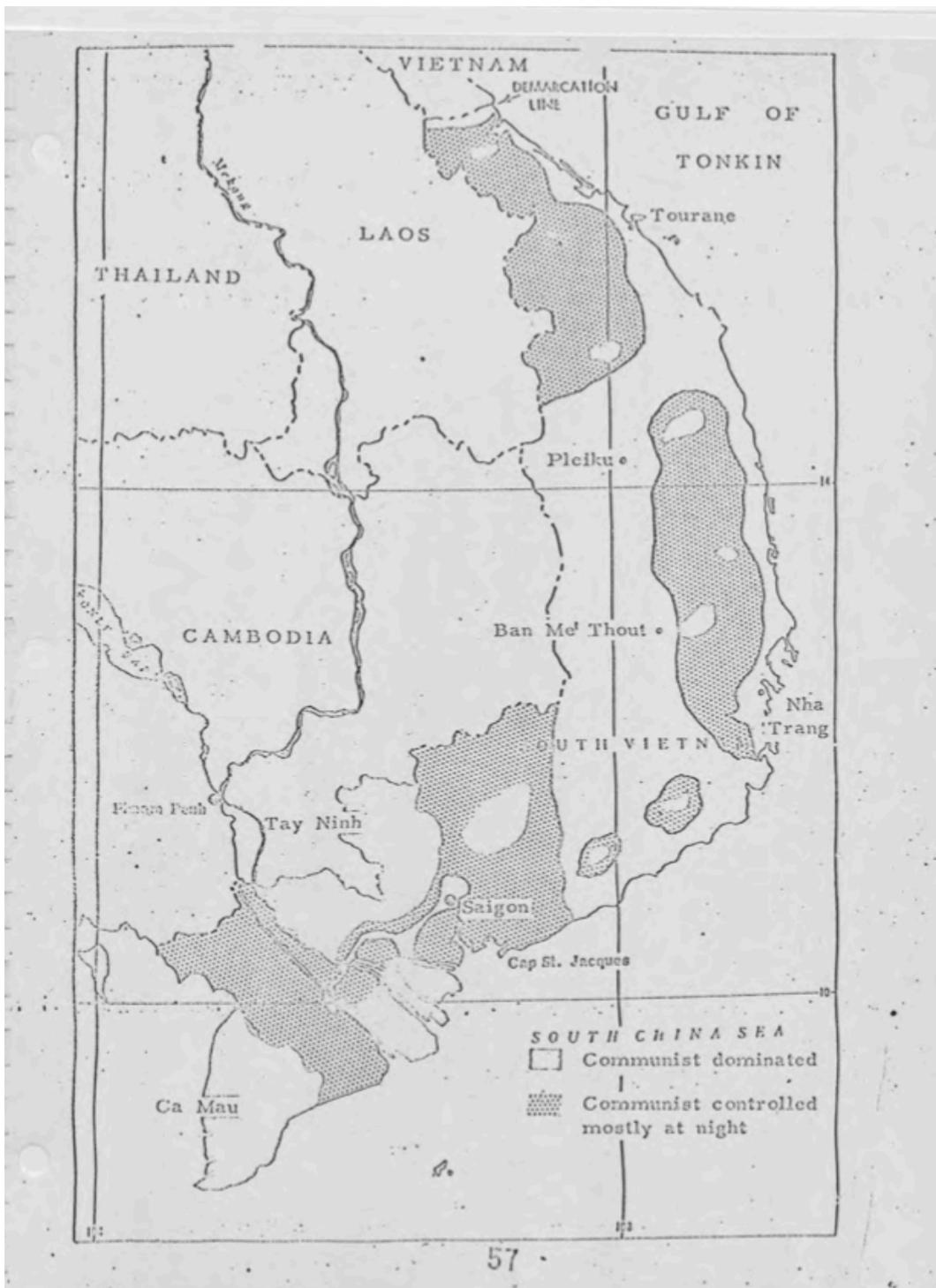
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## 10) ANNEX

### Annex 1: map



Map of Vietnam in a memorandum for President Kennedy designed in April 1961. Describes the areas dominated by communists. Source: Pentagon Papers (1976c, p. 57)

Annex 2: table

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I. STATISTICAL TRENDS, 1962-1963

	Jan. 1- June 30, 1962	July 1- Dec. 30, 1962 (and % of change)	Jan. 1- June 30, 1963, (and % of change)	July 1- Sept. 18, 1963*	% of previous period	
1. Viet Cong Incidents (total)	10,481	8,595 (-18%)	6,847 (-20%)	3,777	55%	
2. Viet Cong armed Attacks (total)	3,024	2,441 (-19%)	1,941 (-20%)	1,067	55%	
Company-size and larger	156	63 (-40%)	72 (+14%)	34	47%	
3. Viet Cong Casualties (total)	13,755	17,338 (+26%)	13,944 (-20%)	6,425	46%	
4. GVN Casualties (total)	6,036	6,846 (+13%)	8,056 (+18%)	4,220	52%	
	Jan.- April 1962	May - Aug. 1962	Sept. - Dec. 1962	Jan.- April 1963	May - Aug. 1963 (and % of change)	Thru Sept. 18, 1963 (and % of previous period)
5. Viet Cong Weapons Losses	1,202	1,526	1,806	1,917	1,703 (-11%)	335 (20%)
GVN Weapons Losses	1,777	1,884	1,534	1,974	2,260 (+15%)	644 (28%)
6. Viet Cong Defections**	1962 Total: 1,956		1,178	1,307 (+10%)	107 (8%)	

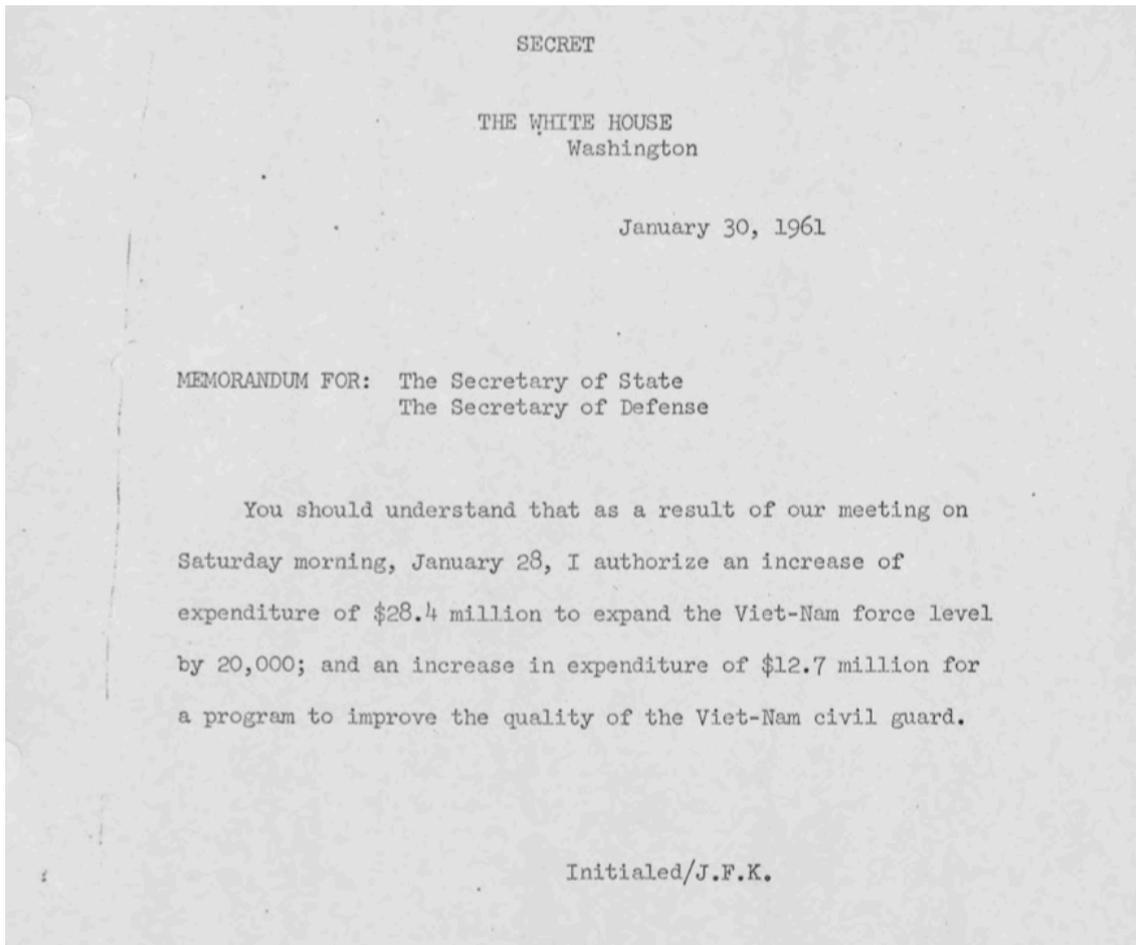
\*Although only 42% of this period has elapsed, the statistics in this column are already 46%-55% of the total figures for the previous six-month period, as shown in the last column.

\*\* This excludes "Chieu Hoi" returnees which have totalled 13,664 through August 1963 but which have declined sharply since July 1963.

SECRET/NO FOREIGN DISSEM

A table which describes the statistic trends of the Viet Cong related issues in the period from 1962 to 1963. It was annexed in a national security memorandum for the Secretary of State. Source: Pentagon Papers (1967c, p. 583).

Annex 3: authorization



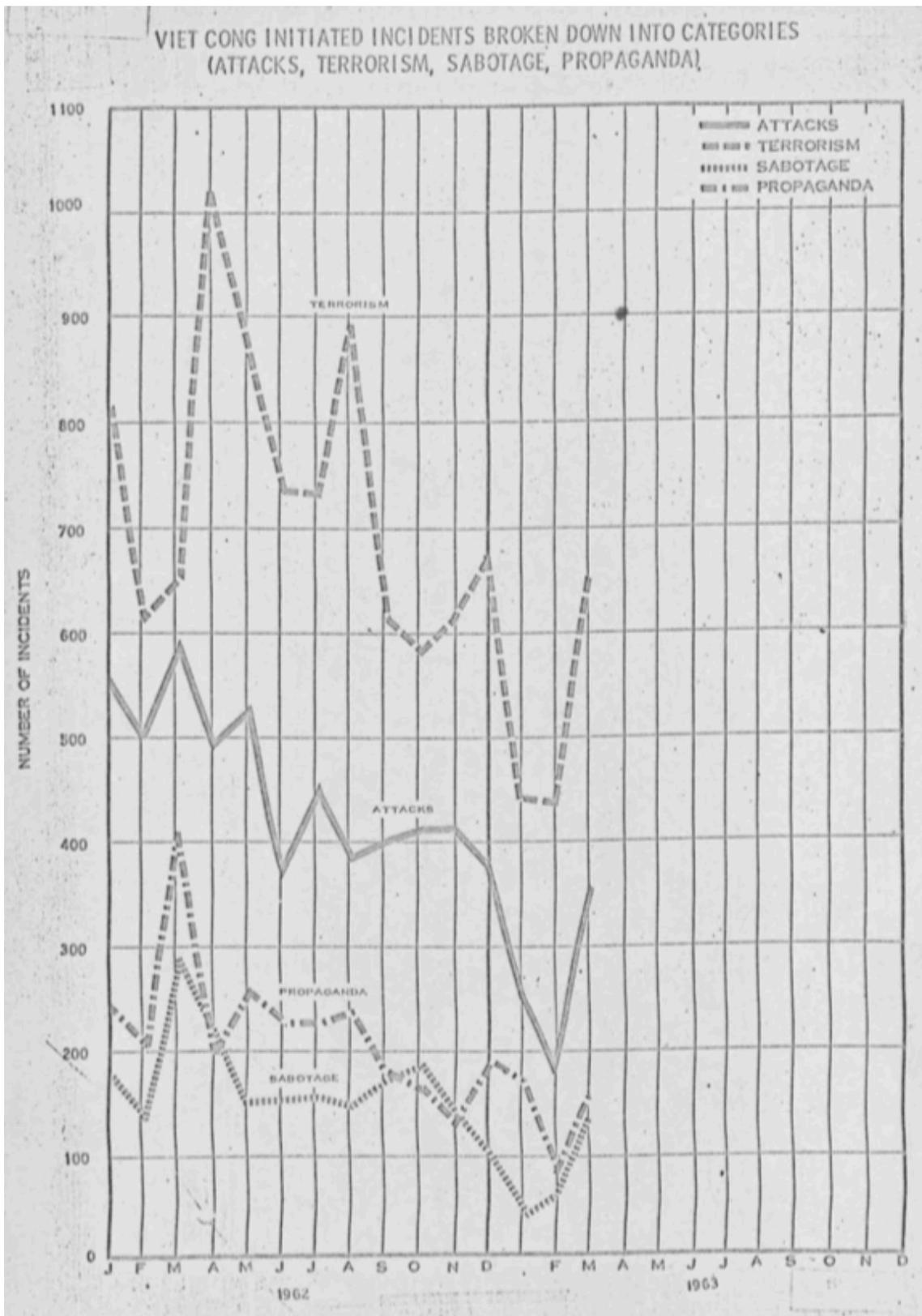
President Kennedy's authorization to increase expenditure for the Vietnam War. Source: Pentagon Papers (1967c, p. 13)

Annex 4: map



A map as part of analysis for the Strategic Hamlet Program that shows the strategic hamlets within the first priority zone. Source: Pentagon Papers (1967a, p. 27)

Annex 5: graph



A graph that shows the Viet Cong initiated incidents between 1962 and 1963 broken down into different categories: attacks, terrorism, sabotage, propoganda. Source: Pentagon Papers (1967a, p. 32).

Annex 6: report

TABLE 1

GVN REPORT ON STATUS OF STRATEGIC HAMLETS

As of 30 September 1962 \*

<u>Area</u>	<u>Strategic Hamlets Planned</u>	<u>Strategic Hamlets Completed</u>	<u>Strategic Hamlets Under Construction</u>	<u>Population in Completed Hamlets</u>
<u>SOUTHERN:</u>				
Saigon	433	105	115	261,470
Eastern Provinces	1,595	291	501	423,060
Western Provinces	4,728	1,236	702	1,874,790
SUB-TOTAL	6,756	1,632	1,318	2,559,320
<u>CENTRAL:</u>				
Central Lowlands	3,630	1,490	682	1,654,470
High Plateau	930	103	217	108,244
SUB-TOTAL	4,560	1,593	899	1,762,714
GRAND TOTAL	11,316	3,225	2,217	4,322,034
<p>- Percentage of planned hamlets completed.....28.49%</p> <p>- Percentage of total population in completed hamlets.....33.39%</p>				
<p>* Adapted from <u>The Times of Vietnam</u>, 28 October 1962, p. 17.</p>				

Some figures as part of a report of status of the Strategic Hamlet Program in September 1962. Source: Pentagon Papers (1967a, p. 28).

